

Representations of Political Violence in Contemporary Middle Eastern Fiction

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Abstract

Today many Middle Eastern states are experiencing political violence, either in the form of foreign occupation, civil war, revolution or coup d'état. This regional violence is not dissociated from international politics. In fact many foreign states are directly involved through influencing, financing or manipulating the situation, and have subsequently been the target of violent attacks themselves. Responding to this situation, a plethora of academic and artistic output concerning Middle Eastern terrorism has emerged from the West. These efforts, especially in English-language fiction, have been mainly reductive and simplistic and have contributed to furthering an atmosphere of mistrust and Islamophobia that emerged after 9/11. Yet in the decade following 9/11 little attention has been given to Middle Eastern writers who have been treating the subject of political violence in their own fiction and whose works are available in a variety of languages. This thesis analyzes five Middle Eastern novels that depict major regional conflict zones. Alaa Al-Aswany, Orhan Pamuk, Assaf Gavron, Yasmina Khadra, and Mohsin Hamid's novels describe the nuances of their respective contexts: Egypt, Turkey, Israel/Palestine, Iraq and Pakistan. The following analyses highlight the complexity of Middle Eastern political violence and shed light on how these authors perceive or respond to Terrorism discourse in their fictions.

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Introduction

This thesis is interested in the ways in which Middle Eastern novelists have portrayed political violence in their fiction in the decade following the events of September 11th, 2001 which saw the proliferation of Terrorism discourse in discussions of most acts of political violence occurring in the region or emerging out of it. It will comprise a series of close readings of five Middle Eastern novels that are available in English-language translation: Alaa Al-Aswany's *The Yacoubian Building* (2002), Orhan Pamuk's *Snow* (2002), Issaf Gavron's *Almost Dead* (2006) also known as *Croc Attack*, Yasmina Khadra's *The Sirens of Baghdad* (2006), and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007). Focusing on narrative techniques, and historical and cultural contextualization, as well as recurrent themes such as militarization, religion, capitalism, and vengeance, the analyses will highlight the complexity of Middle Eastern political violence and shed light on how these authors perceive or respond to Terrorism discourse in their fictions.

Critical Questions

In the winter of 2007 I came across the response of one novelist, Yasmina Khadra, who in an interview with Richard Marcus was asked about the subject matter of his, then newly published, *The Sirens of Baghdad*, and about whether in it he discusses the same themes as his earlier novels. Khadra responded:

I never explore the same topic in my books. Each novel deals with a different phenomenon. It is you who do not manage to separate the different subjects I treat. You are constantly in a state of confusion. *The Swallows of Kabul* speaks about the dictatorship of the Talibans and the condition of the Afghan woman. The *Attack* speaks about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *The Sirens of Baghdad* speaks about the 2nd war of Iraq. Radically different topics, but everywhere you retain only terrorism, terrorism, terrorism. My novels do not speak about terrorism; they talk of human brittleness, anger, humiliation, the fears, sometimes the hopes; and of this burning and fatuous actuality which spoils our life.¹

Khadra's response points to the proliferation of Terrorism discourse in the critical reception and framing of Middle Eastern fiction. The effect that he notes is a reduction of what the author perceives as distinct contexts and political struggles. In another review of Khadra's novel, Ray Olson describes *The Sirens of Baghdad* as "Khadra's second novel about a phenomenon that

¹ Yasmina Khadra, interview by Richard Marcus, *Blogcritics*, 18 Feb 2007.

mystifies so many Westerners—the educated, intelligent Arab terrorist”.² Olson’s framing of the novel in relation to Khadra’s earlier *The Attack* (2005) implies that contexts of Palestinian and Iraqi political violence are equivalent, and that violence committed by characters within these two contexts is necessarily terroristic. Both Marcus’s interview question and Olson’s sweeping description point to the persistence of such reductionist frames.

This reduction, which is propagated by the media, academia, and the arts, is not haphazard or without consequence. Mustapha Marrouchi in *Embargoed Literature* explains that

There seems to be a campaign... to hammer home the thesis that “we are all terrorists now,” and that what has occasionally occurred in the way of Palestinian, Iraqi, or Afghan suicide bombers is more or less exactly the same as the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks. In the process, of course, Palestinians’ dispossession and oppression are simply erased from memory; also excised are the many senseless killings in Iraq and Afghanistan. The overall result is that any attempt to place the horrors of what occurred on September 11 in a context that included US actions and rhetoric is either attacked or dismissed as somehow condoning the terrorist bombardment.³

² Ray Olson, “The Sirens of Baghdad,” *Booklist* 103, no. 13 (March 2007) *Academic Search Complete*, accessed 18 Apr 2015, 39.

³ Mustapha Marrouchi, “Introduction: Embargoed Literature: Arabic,” *College Literature* Vol. 37, No. 1 (Winter 2010), 5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20642072>

Marrouchi's claims suggest that failing to individualize and contextualize instances of political violence in the region has driven us to generalizations. More dangerously this terrorism campaign seems to censor self-reflection and critical thinking and promote a binary and fundamentalist worldview with catastrophic impacts. To identify the contours of current debates on causes, types, and justifications for political violence in the Middle East, as well as contextualize the five novels in relation to various contemporary theoretical perspectives, Chapter I of this thesis will present overviews of the approaches of a number of academic experts, such as Slavoj Žižek, Charles Townshend, Joseba Zulaika, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Edward Said, Noam Chomsky, Najib Ghadbian, Omar A. Rashied, Talal Asad, Khaled Fattah and K.M. Fierke whose work can shed light on this topic.

In *The Political Novel: Re-imagining the Twentieth Century*, Stuart A. Sheingold explains that "The literary imagination is distinctively revealing — a counterpart, a complement, perhaps a corrective, to... other forms of scholarly inquiry".⁴ Middle Eastern political fiction emerging out of the region within the decade following 9/11 can therefore be read as a counterpart and perhaps even a

⁴ Stuart A. Scheingold, *The Political Novel: Re-Imagining the Twentieth Century* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 2.

corrective to this overruling campaign or narrative of terrorism. This genre is not only important to students of literature but within a larger scholarly context as well. As long ago as 1955, Joseph Botner, stated that:

The reader who wants a vivid record of past events, an insight into the nature of political beings, or a prediction of what lies ahead can find it in the political novel. As an art form and an analytical instrument, the political novel, now as ever before, offers readers a means of understanding important aspects of the complex society in which he lives, as well as a record of how it evolved.⁵

The novels dealt with in this thesis place each instant of political violence within a precise socio-political, economic, and even psychological context, and therefore can offer insightful perspectives on the commonalities and pluralities of Middle Eastern violence. How do they depict political violence and perpetrators of political violence in their specific contexts? What motivations do they present as precursors for this violence? What terminology and contextualization do they use to describe instances of violence or violent ideologies? Do Middle Eastern writers frame political violence within the Terrorism discourse, and if so in what capacity? What other frames do they utilize to explain political violence in the Middle East? These are some of the questions that will be addressed within each chapter. Finally the

⁵ Joseph Botner, *The Political Novel* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, INC., 1955), 1.

conclusion of the thesis will compare and contrast the five novels in order to identify areas of similarities and areas of variance in these representations.

Methodology and Selection of Texts

The main chapters of the thesis focus on Middle Eastern political novels depicting political violence published in the time period between 2001 and 2011. While the events of September 11th 2001 signal a clear catalyst for an international focus on Middle Eastern violence and the utilization of the term Terrorism, the beginning of the Arab Spring in early 2011 brings this period to a close because this violence now takes on a different form and is more readily described as revolution, coup d'état, or full-scale war.

The number of novels that can contribute to this research is somewhat limited. This limitation relates to issues of censorship and translation. Many Middle Eastern states include censorship committees that control and limit the publication and distribution of artistic expression that is political, sexual, or religious in nature. For example in Egypt, and according to a study titled *The Censors of Creativity*:

Artistic expression in Egypt is one of the most tightly controlled forms of expression, subject to numerous restrictions, both official, in the form of laws, regulations, and state institutions charged with implementing these codes, and social, in the form of constraints imposed by mainstream culture, particularly when the art addresses one of the three historically controversial topics of politics, religion, and sex.⁶

In Jordan, and according to a report conducted by the staff at *7iber*, the Department of Press and Publication seeks to censor “the trinity of Taboos”: sex, politics, and religion. “Any book which arrives from outside of Jordan with a title that is directly or indirectly linked to Jordan or any of its kings undergoes scrutiny and perhaps censorship, especially if it contradicts the official historical narrative in any way”.⁷ One also cannot dismiss the possibility of self-censorship that can result from the violent targeting of authors who do venture into topics of politics, sex, and religion. There are numerous examples of authors who have been criminally, physically and psychologically targeted because of the content of their novels. Egyptian Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz was fortunate to survive an assassination attempt in 1994 when he

⁶ Ahmed Ezzat, Sally al-Haqq, and Hossam Fazulla, *Censors of Creativity: A Study of Censorship of Artistic Expressions in Egypt*. Cairo: Association for Freedom and Expression, 2014, accessed June 15, 2015. <http://afteegypt.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Censors-of-creativity-English.pdf>

⁷ “Censorship in Jordan: Guarding Readership and Ignoring the Law,” *7iber*, 6 Feb 2014, accessed 4 Apr 2015, <http://www.7iber.com/2014/02/jo-book-censorship/>

was stabbed in response to a revival of interest in his novel *Children of Our Alley* (1959).⁸ Saudi Arabian author of *The 20th Terrorist* (2006) Abdullah Thabit was forced to leave his home in Abha and move to Jeddah after receiving death threats from Islamic radicals responding to his novel. More recently, Egyptian author Karam Saber was sentenced to five years in prison for his 2010 collection of short stories *Where is God* for contempt of religion; and there are numerous other examples. Strict censorship enforced by states or by segments of the society no doubt limits the initial publication and distribution of distinctly political fiction and fiction dealing with religious or sexual content in the Middle East.

Another limitation concerns issues of translation. Many novels that were written in the decade between 2001 and 2011 and which deal directly with political strife in the region, specifically in Syria and Saudi Arabia, were only translated after the Arab Spring, if translated at all – and therefore too late for inclusion in the corpus chosen for the thesis. Translator Roger Allen in *The Happy Traitor* explains that, “there are... significant gaps in English translations: as far as regions go, for example, not much attention has been paid

⁸ Fauzi M. Najjar, “Islamic Fundamentalism and the Intellectuals: The Case of Naguib Mahfouz,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* Vol. 25, No. 1 (May 1998), doi: 10.1080/13530199808705658

to the fiction of the Gulf, Yemen, Sudan... Tunisia, Syria, and the other countries of the Maghrib".⁹ Examples of novels that have not been included in this research for reasons of translation include Khaled Khalifa's *In Praise of Hatred* (2006), originally published in the Arabic language in Beirut, but banned in Syria. This novel is set in 1970s Aleppo, and deals with the war of attrition between the Islamist rebels and the Syrian Secret Police. In 2008, the novel was shortlisted for the international Prize for Arabic Fiction.¹⁰ Leri Price translated it in 2012 after the eruption of the Arab Spring. Nihad Sirees's *The Silence and the Roar*, written from self-exile in 2004, depicts the despotism of an unnamed Middle Eastern state, referring to Syria. The novel was only translated in 2013. Samar Yezbek's novel *Salsal* (2008), which casts a critical eye on the power of the Syrian military, has not been translated at all, though her *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution* which she wrote from self-exile in Paris in 2012 was translated by Max Weiss and was selected to receive financial assistance from English PEN's Writers in Translation Programme. These examples point to a surge of interest in the politics of Syria, and therefore in the translation of Syrian Arabic-language fiction into English,

⁹ Roger Allen, "The Happy Traitor: Tales of Translation," *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (2010), 484.

¹⁰ Maya Jaggi, "Islamic Green or Communist Red? Mayya Jaggi Gets Caught up in a Timely Novel About Syria's Sectarian Strife: *In Praise of Hatred* by Khaled Khalifa", *The Guardian*, Sep 2012, accessed 15 Apr 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/sep/14/in-praise-hatred-khaled-khalifa-review>

subsequent to the events of the Arab Spring. Two Saudi Arabian novels that deal directly with the September 11th attacks are Abdullah Thabit's *The 20th Terrorist* (2006) and Turki al-Hamad's *Winds of Paradise* (2005). Thabit's autobiographical novel was published by Dar El Mada publishing house in Beirut. It is an autobiography that highlights extremism in Saudi Arabian public schools and the indoctrination of young schoolboys to *Takfiri* ideology. *Winds of Paradise* is dedicated to members of the young generation considering suicide missions and urges them to put their luggage aside and think. In response to his novel, al-Hamad was accused of apostasy in an Al-Qaida communiqué and four *Fatwas* were issued against him by Saudi clerics.¹¹ Both controversial novels are still not available in English translation today.

In *The Culture Encounter in Translating from Arabic* (2004) Said Faiq notes a further dilemma in Arabic to English language translation. He explains that, "The Arab world and Islam are still translated/represented through monolingual eyes".¹² In other words the author explains that even though the Arabic-speaking

¹¹ Fred Halliday, *Shocked and Awed* (New York: I.B Tauris & Co Ltd, 2011), 56.

¹² Said Faiq, *Cultural Encounter in Translation from Arabic* (Clevedon: Multilingual matters, 2004), 8.

world is a melting pot of nations, languages, dialects, religions and religious practices, and ideologies, “Arab culture and Islam, distanced by time, space and language(s), are usually carried over – made to cross over – into a Western tradition as an originary moment and image within a master narrative of Western discourse full of ready-made stereotypes and clichés” (5). Translator Alexa Firat in a report for *Literature Across Frontiers* explains that “now that Arabic literature is reaching a larger audience it’s being more and more “Orientalized”—terrorism and the condition of women’s lives, catering to the interests of the general public who’re not necessarily knowledgeable about the region.”¹³ A personal experience of translator Peter Clark can suggest what Faiq and Firat are referring to. Clark explains:

I wanted...to translate a volume of contemporary Syrian literature. I... thought the work of ‘Abd al-Salam al-‘Ujaili was very good and well worth putting into English. ‘Ujaili is a doctor in his seventies who has written poetry, criticism, novels and short stories. In particular his short stories are outstanding. Many are located in the Euphrates valley and depict the tensions of individuals coping with politicization and the omnipotent state. ...I proposed to my British publisher a volume of ‘Ujaili’s short stories. The editor said, ‘There are three things wrong with the idea. He’s male. He’s old and he writes short stories. Can you find a young female novelist?’ (Qtd. in Faiq, 4)

¹³ Alexandra Büchler and Alice Guthrie, “Literary Translation From Arabic into English in the United Kingdom and Ireland, 1990-2010.” *Literature Across Frontiers* (Wales: Mercator Institute for Media, Languages and Culture, 2011). Subsequent reference in text.

Clark's report points to restrictions on the choices of novels for translation. In this case the selection of Middle Eastern fiction for translation focuses more on the author's gender and age than on the quality of their work or ideas. In the same Literature Across Frontiers report translator William Hutchins is quoted as saying that there are all kinds of political pressures involved in the choice of what is or is not published, and also what is applauded or not once it is (69).

Apart from these kinds of limitations, the major consideration in the choice of novels is an attempt to represent a variety of contexts particularly relevant to a post 9/11 geographical conceptualization of the region. The very definition and delimitation of the Middle East has changed after 9/11 and particularly through what author Dona J. Stewart describes as a "war-on-terror framework".¹⁴ Stewart explains that from the onset, the Bush administration had struggled to define the geographical limits of the Middle East: "a series of high-level policy initiatives, designed to address forces such as terrorism and the spread of violent Islamic ideology... spoke of the "Greater Middle East" and the "Broader Middle East" "

¹⁴ Dona J. Stewart, "The Greater Middle East and Reform in the Bush Administration's Ideological Imagination," *Geographical Review* Vol. 95, No. 3, accessed 15 May 2015, doi: 10.1111/j.1931-0846.2005.tb00373.x

(401). The working definition of this greater Middle East, according to Steward, finally included the 22 nations of the Arab World, plus Turkey in Europe, Israel, and Pakistan and Afghanistan in South Asia. This broad geographical definition has been described by one critic as a “one-size-fits-all demographic construct”.¹⁵ Stewart actually notes that: “in adopting terrorism as the dominant lens, the administration’s policy-making process has deemphasized the region’s diverse political, economic, and cultural elements”. Even though the designation “the greater or broader Middle East” has no geographical cogency, it is still consistently used within Terrorism discourse and studies. Focusing on this “terrorism based” definition of the Middle East suggests a scope that should include novels from Arabic-speaking countries, as well as Israel, Turkey, and Pakistan or Afghanistan.

Although original language of publication was not a decisive factor in the choice of novels, it is perhaps appropriate that the five novels finally chosen were originally written in five different languages. This is no doubt suggestive of the linguistic diversity of

¹⁵ Robert Satloff, “Greater Middle East Partnership: A Work Still Very Much in Progress,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 25 Feb 2004, accessed 24 Apr 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-greater-middle-east-partnership-a-work-still-very-much-in-progress>.

the region, which is sometimes characterized as dominated by forms of Arabic. Although Arabic is the mother tongue of almost three hundred million Middle Easterners, there are more than twenty-four other languages spoken in the region including: Turkish, Persian, Hebrew, Berber, and Kurdish. There are also a substantial number of Middle Eastern authors who write in Western languages such as French and English. This aspect of Middle Eastern expression relates to the region's history of colonization. Concerning Western-language fiction emerging out of the Middle East, Edward Said in "The Anglo-Arab Encounter" explains that "we are really talking about an estimable and substantial library of English-language but non-English works, by no means peripheral or ignorable. The same is roughly true of former French colonies and Francophone literature".¹⁶

Given the limitation of available texts in translation as well as the post 9/11 definition of the Greater Middle East, five novels dealing with Egypt, Turkey, Israel, Iraq, and Pakistan written originally in, Arabic, Turkish, Hebrew, French and English respectively have been selected. The novels included are *The Yacoubian Building* (2002) by Egyptian activist and political critic Alaa Al-Aswany,

¹⁶ Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 403.

translated into English from the Arabic *Imārat Ya‘qūbīān* in 2004, and published in Cairo by the private publishing house Madbouly Books. The novel had a target audience of Egyptians and other Arab speakers in the Middle East. It follows an archetypal Egyptian novel structure, utilizing the physical space of a building to demonstrate the compartmentalization of Egyptian socio-political reality. The novel received major critical acclaim in Egypt and was adapted into a film and a TV mini-series. *Snow* (2002), or *Kar* in Turkish, was written by noble laureate Orhan Pamuk and translated by Maureen Freely in 2004. *Snow* was originally published in Turkish by Istanbul-based publishing company Iletisim Yayinlari. Pamuk’s novel is complex in terms of structure but also in terms of theme, dealing with the precarious relationship between state and faith and the often-unmentioned tumults of forced secularization as well as Turkey’s position vis-à-vis Islam and the West. Pamuk himself is one of Turkey’s most prominent and controversial writers. His work has sold more than eleven million copies and has been translated into more than sixty languages, while his comments about a contested Armenian genocide and the mass killings of Kurds during the Ottoman Empire led to his trial in Turkey, the burning of his works, as well as several assassination attempts. *Almost Dead: A Novel* (2006), by Israeli author and translator Assaf Gavron was originally published in Tel-Aviv by Zemorah-Bitan in 2006 in the Hebrew language

under the title *Tanin Pigua* and translated by the author himself in 2010. The presumed intended readership are therefore Hebrew speakers, over seventy percent of whom are Israelis.¹⁷ The novel is a black comedy about a wave of suicide bombings during the second Intifada and highlights the ironies of living in Tel Aviv and Palestine at the time. *Almost Dead* received lukewarm reviews in Israel but has been translated into many languages and received acclaim abroad. *The Sirens of Baghdad* (2006) by Yasmina Khadra was translated from the French *Les sirènes de Bagdad* by John Cullen in 2007, and was originally published in Paris by Éditions Julliard. The intended audience of the novel is presumably an international, or at least francophone community rather than Khadra's native Algerian Arabic speaking community. In the novel the author attempts to understand the mindset of the Iraqi Bedouin (nomad community) in the face of the US invasion, and the futility and irony of counter-terrorist strategies and offensives. The novel is structured around various geographical locations, which make up the chapters, and shed light on the interwoven nature of actions and reactions and their effect on a global scale. The novel is critically described as the second of Khadra's best-selling trilogy of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism, a description that the author himself has critiqued. *The Reluctant*

¹⁷ "Hebrew," Language Materials Project. Center for World Languages, UCLA International Institute, accessed 29 Mar 2014, <http://www.lmp.ucla.edu/Profile.aspx?menu=004&LangID=59>

fundamentalist (2007) by Mohsin Hamid was written originally in English and published in the United States by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and therefore targets a more global audience. The novel structure is unique since it is presented as a monologue with various flashbacks, from the perspective of a Pakistani character in his encounter with an American citizen. It received various awards, became an international best seller, was broadcast on BBC radio in 2011 and turned into a film by Mira Nair in 2012.¹⁸

The order in which these novels will be analyzed is chronological in terms of their original date of publication. This order also maintains a logical and linear flow in terms of the events and conflicts represented: beginning with the early 1990s in Egypt and Turkey, then the period of the second Intifada which began in September 2000 in Palestine and Israel, the Iraq War which began in 2003, and finally the more generalized aftermath of 9/11 and America's War on Terror as portrayed in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

¹⁸ The novel was shortlisted for the 2007 Booker Prize. It also won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, the South Bank Show Annual Award for Literature, and several other awards. *The Guardian* selected it as one of the books that defined the decade.

"What We Were Reading," *The Guardian*, 5 Dec 2009, accessed 10 Feb 2014. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/dec/05/books-of-the-noughties>

CHAPTER I

Contours of the Debate

As mentioned in the introduction in 2007 Yasmina Khadra responded to Richard Marcus's interview question concerning whether *The Sirens of Baghdad* explores the same themes as his earlier books by claiming that: "*The Swallows of Kabul* speaks about the dictatorship of the Talibans... *The Attack* speaks about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *The Sirens of Baghdad* speaks about the 2nd war of Iraq. Radically different topics, but everywhere you retain only terrorism, terrorism, terrorism". At the heart of Khadra's response is a concern with the framing and labeling of political violence in the Middle East and of the interpretation of fictional representations of this violence. This concern is not specific to Marcus's interview question but points to a broader theoretical context that has facilitated its production. Today Middle Eastern political violence is readily described as terrorism, so much so that the phrase "Middle Eastern terrorism" has displaced the more neutral descriptor "political violence in the Middle East". Though this labeling has roots in Western political theory dating back to the 1970s, it has become particularly prominent through media and political treatments following the events of September 11, 2001 and relating to the emergence of groups such as Al-Qaeda

and more recently Daesh, also known as the Islamic State. Since its inception this treatment of political violence as necessarily terroristic has been backed by quantitative and legal studies and propagated by Western media, but has also garnered interest from critical theorists and political historians who have continually sought to understand the elusive phenomenon and its implications. In most of these critical investigations four main points are commonly noted. Firstly that terrorism is not a new phenomenon; that it is not historically specific to the Middle East or to Islamic countries; that use of the term focuses attention on the processes of violence rather than on attempting to understand violence as a product of human experience; and finally, that counter-terrorism strategies are often both self-serving and self-fulfilling. Contemporary critical theorists like Jacques Derrida and Joseba Zulaika argue for abandoning or deconstructing the term, while radical critics like Noam Chomsky and Jean Baudrillard redirect the term to refer to aspects of counter-terrorism and global capitalism as themselves terroristic or suicidal. Other critics like Slavoj Žižek and Charles Townshend adopt the term but insist on highlighting its elusiveness by contextualizing violence within precise and complex historical, political, socioeconomic, and emotional determinants.

The critical framework supporting the discussion of political violence and its fictional representations is extensive. In terms of scope, the discussion can be seen as dating from the eighteenth century when the term 'terrorism' was first coined. The span is also global since the discourse of "national and international terrorism", "state-terrorism", and the "state sponsoring of terrorism" supersedes fixed borders, religions, and ideologies. Therefore this chapter must be selective in its approach. It will focus mainly on providing the theoretical backdrop against which the research questions can be addressed. These questions relate to fictional representations of political violence in the Middle East, focusing on contextualization, motivation and terminology, posed in connection with the existing discourse of terrorism often used to frame this violence after 9/11. The chapter will therefore begin by presenting the contours of contemporary terrorism discourse. The discussion will touch on the historical basis of the term, the shifts in terrorism discourse leading up to the twenty-first century when violence in the Middle East first became identified as terrorism, and will finally focus on critical debates in the twenty-first century following 9/11. To root the discussion in its literary basis, the chapter will also point to shifting trends in fiction and to some of the major fictional works that have accompanied these historical and theoretical changes. These sections, and particularly the later ones, root the five novels under analysis in the thesis to a corpus of

twentieth-century Middle Eastern fiction that has been systematically yet not uncontestably framed within the discourse of Terrorism. The final section relating to fictional representations will highlight Western fiction dealing with political violence in the Middle East both directly predating and following 9/11.

The Emergence of Terrorism Discourse

The etymology of the word “terror” goes back to the Latin *terrorem*, Anglo-Norman *terroure*, and the Middle French *terreur* (French *terreur*), all indicating a state of being terrified or extremely frightened.¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary*, however, distinguishes between ‘terror’ as the emotional state of being frightened and ‘terrorism’, or a system of terror, in which either a government rules by intimidation or a person or group adopts a policy of intimidation intended to strike those against whom it is adopted. Marina Warner points out that while the Latin verb *terrere*, from which ‘terror’ derives, means to terrify or frighten, in later Romance languages the word has both negative and positive/sublime associations.² This positive association is also

¹ “terror, *n*”. *Oxford English Dictionary*. 3rd ed. 2011. Oxford University Press. 30 Apr 2012 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>.

² Marina Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling and Making Mock* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 7.

explicated by Frances B. Singh who refers to Edmund Burke's 1757 *Philosophic Enquiry into the Origins of the Sublime*, where the author claims that "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is terrible, or is analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling".³ Singh explains that Burke's treatise theorized terror as a positive force of self-understanding. In the contemporary scene, the ambivalence between positive and negative associations of the term can be demonstrated in Nicci's Gerrard's piece "Silent Witnesses" where she expounds on the image of the falling man that, "there is an awesome beauty in this terrible sight".⁴

There is clear agreement among critics that the political history of the term 'terrorism' can be traced back to the French Revolution and that at its inception terrorism was carried out in the name of the state. In fact while "several terrorologists have pointed out that the practice of terrorism is an ancient one -- assassination for example being the favorite tactic of the *sicarii* in Palestine during the first century AD", Alex Houen traces the first actual reference to

³ Frances B. Singh, "Terror, Terrorism, and Horror in Conrad's Heart of Darkness," *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007), <https://muse.jhu.edu/>

⁴ Victor J. Seidler, *Remembering 9/11: Terror, Trauma and Social Theory* (Palgrave Hampshire: Macmillan, 2012), 51.

the term to the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror.⁵ Jacques Derrida affirms that the political history of the word terrorism is derived from a reference to the Reign of Terror: “a terror that was carried out in the name of the state and that in fact presupposed a legal monopoly on violence”.⁶ Slavoj Žižek explains that the proclaimed goal of Robespierre’s politics of Truth was “to return the destiny of liberty into the hands of truth... [and that] such a Truth can only be enforced in a terrorist manner”. The author explains that Jacobin Terror is “sometimes (half) justified as the ‘founding crime’ of the bourgeois universe of law and order, in which citizens are allowed to pursue their interests in peace” (x). The initial relationship between the state and terror policies is reaffirmed by Charles Townshend, who notes that “the French Revolution’s ruthless and systematic use of violence created a model for the application of terrorizing force by the holders of state power over the next coming generations”.⁷

Yet even though terrorism as a term was originally coined to refer

⁵ Alex Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature: From Joseph Conrad to Ciaran Carson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Subsequent reference in text.

⁶ Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 105. Subsequent reference in text.

⁷ Charles Townshend, *Terrorism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 41. Subsequent reference in text.

to state violence particularly in France, by the mid-nineteenth century it had become commonly perceived as describing assaults on the state perpetrated by non-governmental groups. Development in explosives, particularly the use of dynamite, as well as the rise in nationalist and anarchist ideologies endorsed the upsurge of revolutionary terrorism with the aim of causing political and social change. Examples of groups who embodied these ideologies and utilized these methods include the Fenian Brotherhood in Ireland, the Ku Klux Klan in the United States, and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation in Russian Transcaucasia. Charles Townshend explains that at the time this type of terrorism was qualitatively new, and that “though few of [the terrorists] acted absolutely alone, they were certainly very small groups with very big ideas about the recasting of society. They believed that individuals could change the course of history” (55). Central elements of the logic of revolutionary terrorists were the power of a violent act to convey complex political messages and the potential receptivity of the masses to the message. Townshend notes that the culminating act of what he describes as the first age of terrorism, the Sarajevo assassination, pushed terrorism into the margins of political action with the result that in the period between the World Wars terrorism went out of style, becoming “absorbed into larger-scale revolutionary movements which... were essentially nationalist mobilizations” (61).

Emergence of Terrorism in Fiction

The emergence of the motif of terror in English-language fiction can be traced back to the literary gothic of the mid-eighteenth century. In terms of form, Angela Wright explains that at the time satirical letters, which argued about a “‘system’ of terror invading the rational realms of British print culture, began to crop up in periodicals across the political spectrum”.⁸ Thematically, Jerrold E. Hogle quotes the views of the Marquis de Sade who in 1807 “‘saw this genre [as] the inevitable product of the [French] revolutionary shock with which the whole of Europe resounded’ because it was able ‘to situate in the land of fantasy’ the violent challenges to established order”.⁹ Classic Gothic works such as William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* (1794) and Matthew Gregory Lewis’s *The Monk* (1795) represent these revolutionary tendencies against religious as well as government institutions. In *The Monk*, for example the maiden’s attempts to escape a rapacious priest might represent an escape from the constrictions of Christian belief and its oppressive institutions into secular freedom, while *Caleb Williams*’s attack on

⁸ Angela Wright, “Gothic Technologies: Visuality in the Romantic Era Haunted Britain in the 1790s,” Praxis Series <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/gothic/wright/wright.html>, accessed 25 June, 2015.

⁹ Jerrold E. Hogle, *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 12-13.

the despotic nature of government and the oppressive restrictions of the law can be perceived as propaganda for anarchism.

The themes and motifs that emerged out of the gothic genre, such as horrific violence, moral ambivalence, introspective criticism of the self and society, are key factors in the shaping of the terrorist novel of the nineteenth century. Far from the allegorical personifications of moral attributes seen in morality tales of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in the nineteenth century, Alison Milbank explains that, "attention moves to the horrors that lurk in our own psyche".¹⁰ In Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), for example, Dr. Jekyll is a respected physician who moves in elevated professional circles, yet out of the back door of his house emerges his counter-ego Hyde to commit violent assaults and sow terror in the city. This ambivalence is also apparent in Joseph Conrad's novella, *Heart of Darkness* (1899) where readers are introduced to the physical and moral excesses of the Belgian colonizing mission in the Congo. The narrator Marlow describes what he sees in the Congo as nothing more than robbery on a grand scale that has been overlooked and even justified by an entire cultural rhetoric. Francis B. Singh explains that in *Heart of*

¹⁰ Alison Milbank, "Gothic Fiction Tells Us the Truth About Our Divided Nature," *The Guardian*, 27 Nov 2011, accessed Jun 8, 2013. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/nov/27/gothic-fiction-divided-selves>

Darkness it is actually Kurtz, and not the cannibalizing Africans, who is described as the terror-inspiring figure: the “criminally evil and morally deranged protagonist common in Gothic literature” (208). In this case the novella serves as a powerful instance of self-criticism using the myth of “terror-inspiring natives” to point to real violence perpetuated by the European self in the colonial setting. Singh claims that in the novella “[Conrad] presents horrors, whether physical or psychological, as the end result of terror tactics” carried out by the colonizing state (202).

Critics like Judith Shulentz believe that Conrad’s early-twentieth century novel *The Secret Agent* (1907) can be described as the archetypal novel about terrorism. Demonstrating its relevance, Shulevitz mentions that, “in the aftermath of the attacks on Sept. 11, Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* became one of the three works of literature most frequently cited in the American media”.¹¹ Ironically the novel’s plot revolves around a foreign state’s sponsoring of an act of terrorism in order to provoke a crackdown on perceived terrorists. The novel can be read as suggesting that real evil emerges from the exigencies of counterterrorism, rather

¹¹ Judith Shulevitz, “Chasing After Conrad’s Secret Agent,” *Slate Magazine*, 27 Sep 2001, accessed 5 Apr 2012, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2001/09/chasing_after_conrads_secret_agent.html

than from the plotting of anarchists. The novel also demonstrates the indolence and naiveté of the characters charged with anarchism and terrorism, as well as the umbilical relationship of these characters with the institution which they oppose, the state. In the course of the investigation of the bombing for example, the fraudulent nature of the police and the dubious role of the media in the sensationalizing of an act of violence are highlighted. In the novel the Assistant Commissioner realizing the connection between the secret agent and the bombing claims to the secretary of state that:

There's but poor comfort in being able to declare that any given act of violence—damaging property or destroying life—is not the work of anarchism at all, but of something else altogether—some species of authorized scoundrelism. This, I fancy, is much more frequent than we suppose.¹²

Conrad's reference to "authorized scoundrelism" is a reference to state-sponsored terrorism and the novel is perhaps one of the earliest indictments of the complicity between Western states, their police forces, and their media. Even though Conrad can be seen as the father of the terrorist novel, he was not the only writer utilizing the motif at his time. Earlier examples of popular terrorism fiction in the nineteenth century include Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Dynamiters* (1885), Donald MacKay's *The Dynamite Ship* (1888), and Ignatius Donnelly's *Caesar's Column* (1891).

¹² Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (London: Methuen & Co, 1907), 75-76.

Terrorism and the Middle East

Terrorism reemerged at the end of World War II with the onset of the Cold War. Charles Townshend argues that three post-1945 events had an immense effect on shaping this new wave of terrorism: the wars in Vietnam and Cuba and the struggle of the Palestinian Arabs to recover from the disaster of 1948. According to the author these events played a key part in the rebirth of terrorism and changed the geographical scope of terrorism discourse. Another important development, according to Joseba Zulaika in *Terrorism: The Self Fulfilling Prophecy*, is the formation of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) with a mission to halt the spread of communism and then to combat terrorism.¹³ Zulaika quotes 1940s American diplomat and historian George Kennan commenting on the nature of the fight against communism, that:

We had accustomed ourselves, through our wartime experience, to having a great enemy before us who had to be considered capable of doing everything that was evil and bad for us. And as our attention shifted from Hitler's Germany to what was now the other greatest military power in Europe, we began to attach these sorts of extremist views to Russia, too... the enemy must always be a venter, he must be totally evil, he must wish all the terrible things that could happen to us. (136)

¹³ Joseba Zulaika, *Terrorism: The Self Fulfilling Prophecy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 131. Subsequent reference in text.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union these extremist views of the enemy, communism, were transferred to a newer enemy: international terrorism. Zulaika maintains that, “as frequently stated, Reagan’s administration conflated Communism and Terrorism, while itself engaging in all sorts of terroristic warfare in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Cuba, northern Africa, South Africa and Lebanon” (143).

Unsurprisingly, these political events mirrored a shift in academic and statistical interest in the motif of terrorism. Zulaika notes that, “during the period between 1986 to 1992 there was not a single fatality caused by terrorism in the United States. Yet over four of those same years, from 1989 to 1992, American libraries catalogued over fifteen hundred new book titles under the rubric ‘terrorism’ and 121 books under ‘terrorist.’” (146) Townshend adds that the very nature of terrorism discourse began to shift in that period, particularly relating to a shift from political terrorism to religiously motivated terrorism. Leading studies of the phenomenon, such as the ones conducted by Walter Laqueur or Grant Wardlaw in the 1970s and 1980s, had been determinably political. However in the late 1990s a survey asserted that, “the religious imperative of terrorism is the most important defining characteristic of terrorism today” (97). Townshend notes that official assessments followed suit, pointing out to a shifting trend

from primarily politically motivated terrorism, to terrorism that is religious or ideological in nature (97). Townshend concludes that:

How far this reflects a change of perceptions as well as of reality is difficult to say; it is tempting to suggest that the phenomenon—or myth—of ‘international terrorism’, which was looking rather threadbare even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, found a replacement ‘evil empire’ as alarming, and maybe more plausibly international, than the original. (97-98)

According to Noam Chomsky in the 1980s the United States under President Reagan engaged in the first War on Terror, which focused on what was called in the words of Secretary of State George Shultz, “the evil scourge of terrorism,” a plague spread by “depraved opponents of civilization itself”.¹⁴ Chomsky explains that this campaign focused on Central America and the Middle East to devastating effect. Chomsky argues that as a result of the US first War on Terror Central America was turned into a graveyard. Hundreds of thousands of people were massacred—two hundred thousand, approximately—over a million refugees, orphans, great masses of torture, and every conceivable form of barbarism was carried out (49). In the Middle East, the author explains, there were plenty of state-sponsored terrorist atrocities, the worst being the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, in which about twenty thousand people were killed. Chomsky argues that this specific

¹⁴ Noam Chomsky, *Power and Terror* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 48. Subsequent reference in text.

case is one example of the many instances of international terrorism that took place in the region at the time, acts that were “able to proceed because the United States gave the green light, provided the arms, and provided diplomatic support” (52).

Second-Age Terrorism in Fiction

An interesting shift in the Western representation of terrorism in fiction accompanied the shift in political discourse noted by Zulaika, Townshend, and Chomsky. Authors Robert Appelbaum and Alexis Paknadel conducted a comprehensive survey where over a thousand novels dealing directly with terrorism were documented from the period 1970 to 2001. The authors believe that this period represents a clear rise in the use of terrorism as a subject in English-language literature and that the literature of that period saw a great transformation in the representation of the figure of the terrorist.¹⁵ They add that in post 1970s’ literature “terrorists are often magnificently adept at inflicting harm on others and challenging the security and the politics of their adversaries” (401). The classics informing this period include Frederick Forsyth’s *The Day of the Jackal* (1971) and Thomas

¹⁵ Robert Appelbaum and Alexis Paknadel, “Terrorism and the Novel, 1970-2001,” *Poetics Today*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Fall 2008): 401. Subsequent reference in text.

Harris's *Black Sunday* (1973). Appelbaum and Paknadel assert that the realism used in the depictions of these formidable terrorists may actually convince readers to take the fantasies of danger seriously, to see plausibility and vitality in them. The authors believe that the representation of terrorism in novels since the 1970s is generally exaggerated and paranoid, creating a "fiction of fear, nightmarish in its concocting of terrors, ghoulish in its concocting of agents of mass destruction" (402). This fiction of fear is not only directed at terrorists, but at counter-terrorist agents as well, for example in John le Carré's novel *Drummer Girl* (1983). Appelbaum and Paknadel clarify however that paranoia is not the only register of the mythography of terrorism in Anglophone fiction of the period: "there are noirish treatments of the subject; there are comic treatments, satiric treatments, melodramatic treatments, romantic treatments, tragic ones, and so forth" (404).

The authors however argue that in the face of this diversity, "English-language literature mainly limited itself to the usual suspects: Palestinians, above all, but also IRA recruits, Irish Ultras, post-sixties anarchists in America and Europe, and Latin American communists", with a few oddities (404). The authors also point to these works' limited political orientation, narrative perspective, plot development, and ability to invoke empathy and sympathy. Few of the novels from this period narrate from the perspective of

the terrorist, with the exception of Doris Lessing's *The Good Terrorist* (1985). The authors note that:

A novel that takes its readers into the seeing, feeling, and thinking of a terrorist, and that does so sympathetically, however nuanced or ambivalent its sympathies might be, for example, in Albert Camus's stage play *Les justes* (1948) or Sahar Khalifeh's Palestinian novel *Wild Thorns* (1984)—such a thing is rare indeed in English-language fiction. (408)

It is not surprising perhaps that Camus and Khalifeh come from Algeria and Palestine respectively.

In fact reference to Khalifeh's novel *Wild Thorns* opens up the discussion of the framing of political violence in the Middle East and the fiction depicting this violence, the topic of this thesis. The novel, *Wild Thorns*, in particular has been indicated in Appelbaum and Paknadel's research as an example of non-English terrorism fiction. It is also a political novel, and has been described by Middle Eastern critics as part of the genre of Palestinian Resistance Literature. Francis Blessington in *Politics and the Terrorist Novel* explains that at the heart of the terrorist novel usually lies a tripartite choice: "to inflict disaster on the world and perhaps on oneself for real or imagined humiliations; to accept a flawed and unjust world; or to escape the dilemma, usually through suicide,

without destroying others".¹⁶ The author explains that in the terrorist novel there are no absolute answers, and no absurdist existential or postmodern claims of unknowability (117). "The characters waver and decide, we see their fates, the authors present their cases, and we judge their validity" (117). Blessington suggests that the terrorist novel typically concentrates on the dilemma of a character who is trapped among often negative alternatives (117). The character needs to make a choice between these negative alternatives, "by highlighting choice, the terrorist novel distinguishes itself from its cognate, the political novel" (117).

Sahar Khalifeh is a Palestinian female novelist and her novel *Wild Thorns* written in the 1980s is predominantly about war, and about how West Bank residents can survive under the Israeli occupation, as well as the approaches they have taken to survive this occupation. In the novel the two main characters, Usama and Adil, represent the two primary approaches. Usama is an idealist who returns from the Gulf as a rebel fighting for the Palestinian cause through violent means. Adil is the pragmatist, who ends up working inside Israel to provide for his family. The novel delves into the internal Palestinian struggle when Usama takes on a

¹⁶ Francis Blessington, "Politics and the Terrorist novel," *Sewanee Review*, Vol. 116, No. 1 (Winter 2008): 116-117.

mission that involves blowing up Palestinian buses that bring workers over the border to Israel. In the novel Khalifeh examines rebellion as a “privileged” position, the nature of Palestinian betrayal, as well as the necessity of survival in a war situation.

Middle Eastern literary critics have described the novel as part of the genre of “resistance literature”.¹⁷ Palestinian writer and secular revolutionary Ghassan Kanafany coined “resistance” as a critical term in his 1966 study *Literature of the Resistance in Occupied Palestine*, theorizing “resistance literature” as literature that was part of the “arena of struggle” against an occupying power.¹⁸ Edward Said elucidated the power of this type of fiction by claiming that seizing the “permission to narrate”, the power to communicate Palestinian history to and by the Palestinian people themselves and to the outside world, is an act of resistance and an act of cultural survival (qtd. in Metres, 87). Concerning the conditions of Palestinian literary production at the time, Barbara Harlow explains that in 1966, “the literature of occupied Palestine (Israel) was, because of official repression and censorship inside Israel and studied neglect within the Arab world, largely unknown

¹⁷ Philip Metres, “Vexing Resistance, Complicating Occupation: A Contrapuntal Reading of Sahar Khalifeh’s “Wild Thorns” and David Grossman’s “The Smile of the Lamb””, *Embargoed Literature: Arabic*, Vol. 37, No. 1, (Winter, 2010): 87. Subsequent references in text.

¹⁸ Ghassan Kanafany, *Literature of the Resistance in Occupied Palestine 1948-1966* (Cyprus: Rimal Publications, 2013).

outside the borders of the then 18-year-old state of Israel”.¹⁹ Harlow adds that referencing Palestinian fiction as part of “resistance literature” is contextualizing this literature within the contemporary national liberation struggles and resistance movements against Western imperialist domination (4). Designating Khalifeh’s work as part of the genre of terrorism literature or resistance fiction, as opposed to the more generic political fiction, is to frame the novel within a political construct which judges the nature of the violence as justified or not, thereby offering a political rather than a literary critique. In other words, this framing of the novel does not necessarily rest on elements of the choice afforded to the main characters, as suggested by Blessington, but on critics’ ideas about the very nature of this violence.

Other Palestinian authors writing in the same period and about similar themes include the renowned Kanafany himself who produced over twenty works in Arabic, four of which have been translated into English including the two novels *Men in the Sun* (1962), translated in 1998, and *All That's Left to You* (1966), translated in 2004. Mourid Bargouti is another renowned Palestinian author whose *I Saw Ramallah* (1997) has been described by Edward Said as “one of the finest existential accounts

¹⁹ Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1978), 2.

of Palestinian displacement we now have.”²⁰ Other examples of Middle Eastern authors dealing with political violence at the time include Yusuf Idris, who published a plethora of short stories, novellas, and novels during the second part of the twentieth century about Egyptian state torture of civilians and the residual anger and violence this creates. Naguib Mahfouz’s *The Day the Leader was Killed* (1985) deals with the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar El Sadat by religious fundamentalists in the aftermath of the Camp David peace agreement. Others include Assia Djebar’s novel *Algerian White* (1995), which examines the bloody struggle in Algeria between Islamic fundamentalists and the post-colonial civil society, beginning with the 1956 battle for independence. Lebanese authors such as Elias Khoury in his *The Little Mountain* (1977), *The Journey of Little Gandhi* (1989), and *Gate of the Sun* (2000), Etel Adnan’s *Sitt Marie Rose* (1978) and Hoda Barakat’s *The Stone of Laughter* (1990), all focus on the turbulent period of Lebanon’s fifteen-year civil war as well as the Palestinian refugee crisis. These novels all provide nuanced accounts of political violence in the Middle East in the twentieth century.

²⁰ Edward Said, Foreword to *I saw Ramalla* by Mourid Barghouti (Cairo: The American University in Cairo, 2000).

Contemporary Terrorism Discourse

The events of September 11, 2001 provide us with a convenient starting date for the twenty-first century. The attacks of that day clearly cemented the association between the terms “Middle East” and “Terrorism” as well as signaled the beginning of what Chomsky would describe as the “Second War on Terror”. Martin Randall explains that in addition to the War on Terror and the controversial invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the event also triggered in the West massive investment in security and surveillance, the rise of anti-Islamic sentiment and a more general mood of paranoia, fear and political instability. Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* clarifies that the events of September 11th have also seen the rise of anti-intellectualism and a growing acceptance of censorship within the media. Butler argues that within this charged atmosphere intellectual positions that are considered relativistic are regarded as possibly complicit with terrorism or at least as constituting a “weak link” in the fight against it. She maintains that “the binarism that Bush proposes in which only two positions are possible—“either you’re with us or you’re with the terrorists”—makes it untenable to hold a position in which one opposes both and queries the terms in which the opposition is framed” (2). This same binarism, according to Butler, “returns us to an anachronistic division between ‘East’ and ‘West’ and which, in

its sloshy metonymy returns us to the invidious distinctions between civilization (our own) and barbarism (now coded as 'Islam' itself)" (2).

This binarism was clear in media and political handling of the situation but it was also espoused by some writers like, for example Martin Amis, in his collection of essays and short stories *The Second Plane*. In *The Second Plane* Amis argues that Americans are good and right by virtue of being American. On the other side, Amis describes militant fundamentalism as an irrationalist, agonistic, theocratic/ideocratic system that is opposed to America's existence. In his "The Age of Horrorism" Amis claims that, "All religions, unsurprisingly, have their terrorists, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, even Buddhist. But we are not hearing from those religions. We are hearing from Islam".²¹ In an interview with Ginny Dougary for the *Times* on September 9, 2006, and shortly after the transatlantic terror alert of that year, Amis was reported to have said, referring to Islamists:

What can we do to raise the price of them doing this? There's a definite urge—don't you have it?—to say, 'The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.' What sort of suffering? Not letting them travel. Deportation—further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people

²¹ Martin Amis, "The Age of Horrorism," *The Guardian*, 10 Sep 2006, accessed 5 Nov 2014.
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/sep/10/september11.politics.philosophyandsociety>

who look like they're from the Middle East or from Pakistan ... Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children.²²

Such discriminatory treatments of the other in the War on Terror elicited strong responses from many Western critics. For example, Terry Eagleton in *Holy Terror* claims that, "in the so-called war against terror, 'evil' is used to foreclose the possibility of historical explanation".²³ He argues that by disparaging any rational analysis this rhetoric reflects something of the fundamentalism that it confronts. Eagleton explains that in post-9/11 rhetoric "terrorist assault is just a surreal sort of madness, like someone turning up at a meeting of the finance committee dressed as a tortoise. Like the sublime, it lies beyond all rational figuration" (116). He points out the danger of such rhetoric, claiming that, "genuinely believing that your enemy is irrational, as opposed to pretending to do so for propagandist reasons, will almost certainly ensure that you cannot defeat him" (117). Similarly, Judith Butler explains that the frame for understanding violence emerges in tandem with the experience and that "the frame works both to preclude certain kinds of questions, certain kinds of historical inquiries, and to function as a

²² Rachel Donadio, "Amis and Islam," *The New York Times*, 9 Mar 2008, accessed 24 Jun 2015.
http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/09/books/review/Donadio-t.html?_r=

²³ Terry Eagleton, *Holy Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 116.

moral justification for retaliation” (4). She explains that:

We tend to dismiss any effort at explanation, as if to explain these events would accord them rationality, as if to explain these events would involve us in a systematic identification with the oppressor, as if to understand these events would involve building a justificatory framework for them. Our fears of understanding a point of view belies a deeper fear that we shall be taken up by it, find it contagious, become infected in a morally perilous way of thinking of the presumed enemy. (8)

Both Eagleton and Butler’s comments highlight a problematic with the dominant ways in which contemporary political violence has been framed.

In fact many critics point to the inadequacy of terrorism discourse as a frame for understanding contemporary political violence. Initially, the term ‘terrorism’ does not have a homogeneous definition, even within contemporary political discourse. Alex Conte affirms that, “there is currently no comprehensive, concise, and universally accepted legal definition of the term”.²⁴ Caleb Carr adds that:

Many if not most Americans, in 1996 as in 2001 and today, were and remain surprised to learn that almost every agency of the U.S. government that deals with the threat of terrorism maintains its own

²⁴ Alex Conte, *Human Rights in the Prevention and Punishment of Terrorism: Commonwealth Approaches: The United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand* (London: Springer Science & Business Media, 2010), 7.

definition of that phenomenon. More surprisingly still, among these definitions, no two are identical or even, in some cases, easy to reconcile with one another.²⁵

Carr explains that the definitions are far from being encompassing or authoritative, in fact most “have been deliberately structured to exclude certain types of violent activities that the non-specialist might quite reasonably identify as ‘terrorist’, or to include still others, generally on the basis of little more than a political preference for a country, faction, or cause” (47).

In an earlier study, conducted in 1996, authors Joseba Zulaika and William A. Douglass clarify that “[f]ar from being a benign or gratuitous labeling exercise, the stark issue of who has the power to define another as terrorist has obvious moral and political implications”.²⁶ First the authors explain that “[a]s a premise, terrorism tends to be about the other; i.e., one’s country, one’s class, one’s creed, one’s president, oneself can hardly be a terrorist” (13). And second, is the fluidity and flexibility with which that categorization of the ‘Other’ can change. The authors of *Terror and Taboo* ironically note that “[w]hat is most striking about the

²⁵ Caleb Carr, *The Lessons of Terror: A History of Warfare Against Civilians: Why it has Always Failed and Why it will Fail Again* (New York: Ransom House, 2002), 47. Subsequent reference in text.

²⁶ Joseba Zulaika and William A. Douglass, *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables, and Faces of Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 16. Subsequent references in text.

blacklisted is not their sinister vocation but rather the shiftiness in club membership" (12). The most blatant effect of this new mode of defining 'Otherness', according to Zulaika and Douglass is a:

political mockery...dismissing entire countries as 'terrorists' or 'terrorist sympathizers' -- by abolishing their long and rich histories, by debasing their languages, by stigmatizing their representations, by sheer self-deception...premised on the intellectual banality of constructing discourse around a word that inevitably imposes conceptual ratification within a tabooed context. (23-24)

The most troubling aspect about labeling certain political violence as terrorism is implication. Conte questions why we talk about terrorism at all and differentiate it from the word 'crime', and wonders why we adopt new laws and different standards (8). He explains that any terrorist act will, after all, comprise a series of acts constituted of various criminal offences. He answers this question by claiming that, "Jenkins (former head of the Terrorism Project at the Rand Institute) has observed that if one looks at terrorism as a crime, there will be a need to gather evidence, arrest a perpetrator and put them on trial" (9). He adds that with the term terrorism "one can be less concerned with the aspect of individual guilt, and an approximate assessment of guilt and intelligence are sufficient" (9). This aspect perhaps represents the incentive for the continued use of the ambiguous term.

Jacques Derrida is quoted in Borradori's work claiming that the deconstruction of the notion of terrorism is the only politically responsible course of action, since the sets of distinctions within which we understand the meaning of the term are problem-ridden (xiii). Deconstruction in this sense and according to Borradori seeks to disassemble any discourse standing as a "construction". She explains that deconstruction is an individualized type of intervention aimed at destabilizing the structural priorities of each particular construction. Similarly, Joseba Zulaika quotes Richard Jackson's conclusion that "resisting the discourse is not an act of disloyalty; it is an act of political self-determination; and it is absolutely necessary if we are to avoid another stupefying period of fear and violence like the cold war" (1).

9/11 in Western Fiction

Indeed the events of 9/11 changed history and signaled the beginning of the twenty first century, but these events also signaled the birth of a new literary genre: 9/11 fiction. This body of fiction emerged in tandem with the tragic events and represents a Western, and particularly American, attempt to deal with trauma and disaster. For a number of reasons many critics evaluating Western 9/11 fictional responses have described these attempts as

lacking. For example Richard Gray in *After the Fall* explains possible reasons for what he calls a formal and political failure of fiction to respond to disaster (47). He explains that most post-9/11 American fiction betrays a response to crisis, which is analogous to the reaction of many politicians and the mainstream media (47). Measures of their limitation that he mentions include a return to the seductive myth of American exceptionalism, scrambling after the familiar, as well as an imaginative paralysis when it comes to the encounter with the other. The other, in this instance, according to Gray, is Islam (47-49). One example that Gray mentions is Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007). In the novel the main character Keith Neudecker escapes the scene after the collapse of the south tower, carrying a suitcase belonging to a stranger and goes home. After the catastrophic opening, the remainder of the novel is almost entirely aftermath, delving into the relationship of Keith and his wife Lianne as well as his relationship with the suitcase owner. Gray mentions that, "the structure [of *Falling Man*] is too clearly foreground, the style excessively mannered; and the characters fall into postures of survival after 9/11 that are too familiar to invite much more than a gesture of recognition from the reader".²⁷

Martin Randal in *9/11 and the Literature of Terror* focuses on Ian

²⁷ Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 67. Subsequent reference in text.

McEwan's and Don DeLillo's prose, arguing that "realist fiction generally failed to identify and describe the 'wounds' left after the attacks" (3). Randall notes that first responses to 9/11 were constructed around survivor/eyewitness accounts (2). For example, Randall describes McEwan's prose in *Saturday* as essayistic or journalistic, recalling his earlier essay "Beyond Belief" (21). Another criticism of McEwan's prose is that it is articulated through a very partisan perspective. "The passengers are merely 'brave' and the hijackers are merely 'fanatics'. Such simplistic binaries are common in the early responses to 9/11 – redolent as they are of much mainstream opinion at the time" (21). Randall also critiques Don DeLillo in *In the Ruins of the Future* and *Falling Man* for writing in distinctly oppositional, partisan language, "evoking 'we' and 'they', 'our' and 'he/their'" (26). Randall explains that if McEwan utilized the pronouns 'we' and 'us' to indicate a form of Western solidarity, DeLillo's position is defiantly American. He writes that Americans are "rich, privileged and strong" and that America's technological systems are a "miracle" while 'their' culture is suffused with 'hatred', 'a morality of destruction' and 'suicidal fervor'" (6-8). Randall clarifies that in these novels the opposition is clear: American techno-modernity is opposed by medievalist theocratic violence (26).

Another aspect of 9/11 fiction that Randall notes is the conviction

that the event has ruptured reality. This amounts to a 'before/after' binary that is based on the assumption of 9/11's epochal and global importance. "This can be summarized as a belief that 'before' 9/11 the world was one thing and now 'after' 9/11 everything has changed irrevocably" (35). The author notes that there are obvious reasons why this position is potentially dangerous (35). In one sense the 'before/after' binary evident in so many of the initial responses to 9/11 is a certain kind of barely articulated American (Western) 'innocence' destroyed by an outside 'evil'. Such a position formed the central rhetoric of the Bush administration's justifications for invading Afghanistan and, more pointedly, Iraq. Randall notes that, "such 'innocence' is, of course, a convenient myth and one that continues to prevail in many aspects of political and cultural discourses" (36).

Kristiaan Versluys in *Out of the Blue* (2009) contends that in the aftermath of 9/11 spontaneous expressions of sympathy with the victims and the tendency to side with the United States almost inevitably entailed the practice of pinpointing and then accusing the enemy, what the author describes as othering.²⁸ Versluys differentiates between concepts of what he describes as the Levantian Other and the act of othering by explaining that, "The

²⁸ Kristiaan Versluys, *Out of the Blue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 150. Subsequent reference in text.

Other... as a concept involves the recognition of a singular and self-generated identity of someone else whereas 'othering' is an act of exclusion, whereby, through prejudice, ignorance, or both, someone refuses to treat someone else as an individual" (150).²⁹ Versluys explains that while there has been extensive commentary on the Bush administration's tendency to make non-negotiable, polarizing distinctions, it has largely escaped the attention of observers that "in the immediate aftermath of the events, when the opinions of American novelists were eagerly solicited by newspapers and magazines, they, too, struggled to find an appropriate tone to speak about terrorist attacks" (150). While the creative imagination is usually associated with a certain power of explanation, a kind of affective or empathetic understanding, an affinity with the other, Versluys argues that the immediate reaction of many savvy novelists reveals how difficult it was not to dichotomize the events, and not to fixate their anger on a well-defined enemy (150-151). Treatments that Versluys cites include Martin Amis's short story "The Last Days of Mohamed Atta" (2006), Michael Cunningham's *The Children's Crusade*, and John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006).

²⁹ Versluys uses the term Levantian as opposed to Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim. The Levant is a historical geographical term referring to a large area in the eastern Mediterranean. The equivalent Arabic term for the Levant is the Mashriq as opposed to the Maghreb (referring to North Africa with the exception of Egypt).

Alternative Frames of Middle Eastern Political Violence

Critics like Terry Eagleton, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida and Joseba Zulaika among others have pointed out the shortcomings of the terrorism framework. At the same time literary critics have also been pointing out the proliferation of this partisan and fundamentalist framework within 9/11 fiction. Fortunately there are other frames put forth by academics and historians to contextualize contemporary political violence and particularly that emerging out of the Middle East. These frames do not exonerate violence; they are explanatory and illustrate the complexity of the context. They can therefore serve to develop our understanding of the region and shed light on the issues brought forth by many contemporary Middle Eastern writers in their novels, as will be demonstrated in the coming chapters. These frames focus on historical, economic, and emotional readings of political violence in the region, bearing in mind the specificity of the post-colonial experience and the Islamic tradition, as well as the cultural background of contemporary Middle Eastern societies.

Historical readings of political violence in the Middle East will often contextualize it within the post-colonial and neo-imperial

experience.³⁰ Robert Young, for example, notes that after World War II, American imperialism signaled a shift from direct colonial management over foreign lands and peoples to a more subtle form of economic influence and management, sometimes referred to as neocolonialism.³¹ Elleke Boehmer contextualizes regional violence by arguing that crucial colonial legacies of state violence, which many post-2001 studies evade or ignore, might be responsible for modern manifestations of what she describes as globalized world terror. Boehmer suggests that framing the concept of terror within postcolonial discourse will allow us to “examine its occurrence in the reciprocally violent historical contexts of colonialism and global neo-colonialism” (6).

Critics Khaled Fattah and K.M. Fierke point to specific colonial policies, such as the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 and the Balfour Declaration as catalysts for continuing regional political violence. The artificial, arbitrary and conflict-laden borders of today’s Middle East are largely based on this secret agreement, with Iraq being a concrete example. Another aspect of colonial rule with

³⁰ While colonialism describes the physical settlement of foreign lands by European powers, imperialism according to Robert Young is an overarching political theory of primarily economic (but also sometimes political) domination and control.

³¹ Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An historical introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 42. Subsequent reference in text.

major ramifications on the region is the Balfour Declaration. Joel

Beinan and Lisa Hajjar explain that:

The establishment of Israel in 1948, which was heavily supported by the West, constituted a new *regional* dynamic. Palestinian Arabs and the surrounding Arab states rejected the 1947 UN plan to partition Palestine and viewed the General Assembly vote as an 'international betrayal'.³²

Authors Shahram Akbarzadeh and Fethi Mansouri point to an interesting link between the region's colonial past and the rise of political Islam. They argue that Islamism grew partly as a response to the failure of the top-down state building projects in the Middle East and the Muslim world following Europe's colonial withdrawal.³³ The authors explain that:

Territorial demarcations drawn up by colonial powers imposed the contours of modern states... Progress became the catch phrase of the leadership in these developing states [and] Islam was not seen as an important parcel of the modernization drive. Perhaps revealing an intellectual affinity with the colonial powers that viewed Islam as a primitive religion, the national elites did not envisage a place for Islam in the nascent modern states. State policies ranged from active suppression of Islamic manifestations as anti-modern in Turkey and Iran, to ignoring it as irrelevant in Iraq and Jordan, to its public tolerance as politically expedient in Pakistan.

³² Joel Beinan and Lisa Hajjar "Palestine, Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Primer," *Middle East Report 154: The Uprising*, Vol. 18 (September 1988).

³³ Shahram Akbarzadeh and Fethi Mansouri, *Islam and Political Violence: Muslim Diaspora and Radicalism in the West* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2007), 3. Subsequent reference in text.

The common denominator in all cases, however, was that Islam had nothing to contribute to the modern state. Islam's exclusion at the top gave it potential for growth in direct correlation with the failure of the modern state project (3-4).

The quest for progress that in many cases juxtaposed modernity and religion is treated thoroughly in Orhan Pamuk's novel *Snow*, while colonial policies and a post-colonial contextualization of violence is highlighted in Issaf Gavron's representation of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict in *Almost Dead*.

Another framing of contemporary political violence in the Middle East is economic. Concerning capitalist globalization, Žižek in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* explains that while the obvious signals of violence such as acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, and international conflict are at the forefront of our minds, "we should learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible 'subjective' violence [...] We need to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts".³⁴ Žižek differentiates between subjective and objective violence. Objective violence can be symbolic, related to language, or systematic, referring to the often-catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of economic and political systems (1). Žižek asserts that "systematic violence is thus something like the

³⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile Books LTD, 2008), 1. Subsequent reference in text.

notorious ‘dark matter’ of physics, the counterpart of an all-too-visible subjective violence. It may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be ‘irrational’ explosions of subjective violence” (2). The author argues that the fundamental systematic violence of capitalism is much more uncanny than any direct pre-capitalist socio-ideological violence because, “[it] is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their ‘evil’ intentions, but is purely ‘objective,’ systematic, anonymous”.³⁵ The author explains that international terrorist organizations are the obscene double of the big multinational corporations. These terrorist organizations are the form in which nationalist and/or religious fundamentalism accommodated itself to global capitalism (38). Žižek argues that we should refocus our attention on the economic background of the conflict, what he describes as “the clash of *economic* interests” (42).

Jean Baudrillard in *The Spirit of Terrorism* presents another contemporary view on global power relations and violence that is particularly relevant to the reading of Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. He argues that a single world order,

³⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002), 10. Subsequent reference in text.

which has reached its culmination, finds itself today grappling with the antagonistic forces scattered around the globe.³⁶ The author argues that America as a super power has fuelled all this violence that is endemic throughout the world. Concerning the events of 9/11 Baudrillard asserts that:

This goes beyond hatred for the dominant world power among the disinherited and the exploited, among those who have ended up on the wrong side of the global order. Even those who share in the advantages of that order have this malicious desire in their hearts. Allergy to any definitive order, to any definitive power, is—happily—universal. (6)

To explicate his position Baudrillard explains that when a global power monopolizes the world to such an extent, a terroristic situational transfer is unavoidable. In other words, the system itself has created the conditions of this brutal retaliation: “by seizing all the cards for itself, it forces the Other to change the rules. And the new rules are fierce ones, because the stakes are fierce” (8-9). Baudrillard argues that this is not a clash of civilizations or of religions, “it reached far beyond Islam and America, on which efforts are being made to focus the conflict in order to create the delusion of a visible confrontation and a solution based on force” (11). The author argues that there is a fundamental antagonism, but one that points to *triumphant globalization battling against itself* (11).

³⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism* (London: Verso, 2002), 12. Subsequent reference in text.

Indeed framing contemporary violence as a religious question has been readily employed by politicians and reiterated by the media to point to a visible confrontation between the West and Islam. Najib Ghabdian in “Political Islam and Violence”, written one year before 9/11, explains that “the dominant view in the West assumes an affinity between Islamic values and the use of violence in the Muslim world, particularly violence of a political nature”.³⁷ Omar A. Rashied in *Islam and Violence* argues that, “Terrorist violence is never far from popular understandings of Islam. Even conventional academic perspectives regard the political agendas of Islamists [...] as having a predilection for violent paths to social change”.³⁸ The author asserts that according to this view it is the religious dimension that is the primary source of contemporary political violence.³⁹ Ghabdian however questions if there is a real

³⁷ Najib Ghabdian, “Political Islam and Violence,” *New Political Science*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2000): 78, doi: 10.1080/713687889. Subsequent reference in text.

³⁸ Omar A. Rashied, “Islam and Violence,” *The Ecumenical Review* Vol. 55, Issue 2 (April 2003): 158, doi: 10.1111/j.1758-6623.2003.tb00192.x. Subsequent reference in text.

³⁹ Examples of this trend that Ghabdian notes include: when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990, reports had it that even sophisticated political analysts in the US were perusing the Quran, thinking they would find there the cultural mindset undergirding Hussein’s military aggression.... On the other hand, atrocities carried out “in the name of Allah” in Algeria, and by Usama Bin Laden issuing *fatwas* (religious rulings) urging Muslims to kill Americans and Jews, are not mere fabrications of the popular Western stereotype of violent Islam.

connection between Islam and violence. He argues that the religion is “neither violent nor pacific” and that some of the adherents of the Islamic movements use and believe in violence “as a legitimate means to pursue their political goals while others do not”. Rashied points to the opposing perspective of Muslim apologists who deny that Islam has anything to do with terrorist violence, explaining that:

As with all received understandings, there are elements of truth in both these formulations. The first largely understates the contemporary socio-political and economic conditions under which Islam is implicated in violence, and the second ignores the fact that virtually all Muslims accept that Islam is not a pacifist tradition and allows for and legitimates the use of violence under certain conditions, the definitions of which may differ from one Muslim scholar to the other. (158)

Concerning the conditions under which Islam condones violence, the author explains, first, that all religious traditions, Islam notwithstanding, agonize about the question of what might constitute a “just war” and this becomes particularly acute in situations of deadly conflict, and second, that the legitimization of violence does not occur in a socio-historical vacuum. The author quotes the former vice chairman of the National Intelligence Council at the CIA, Graham Fuller, who asserts that “If a society and its politics

are violent and unhappy, its mode of religious expression is likely to be just the same" (159). Fuller in this case makes an interesting distinction between religion and individuals' religious expressions. This distinction adds depth to the analysis of the character of Taha in Al-Aswany's novel *The Yacoubian Building*.

Another possible frame within which to understand political violence, but one largely ignored in terrorism studies, is emotionality. In recent years scholars in political science have attempted to reinvigorate the study of emotions and highlight its importance for understanding contemporary political challenges.⁴⁰ David Wright-Neville and Debra Smith however note that terrorism studies are a notable exception to this tendency. In terrorism studies:

There has been a tendency to focus on delegitimizing the actions of terrorists and favoring the objectives and perspectives of state security over any systematic examination of the subjective journeys of those who engage in sub-state terrorist practices. (88)

Stephen K. Rice asserts that "a great many works from defense and security analysis either fail to recognize the importance of

⁴⁰ David Wright-Neville and Debra Smith, "Political rage: Terrorism and the politics of emotion," *Global Change, Peace, Security & Global Change* Vol. 21, Issue 1 (2009): 87. Subsequent reference in text.

emotions altogether, or cast them as peripheral to the root causes of terror campaigns” (249).⁴¹ Khaled Fattah and K.M. Fierke in *The Politics of Humiliation* note that although numerous scholars have highlighted the pervasiveness of a discourse of humiliation, and its relationship to the swelling ranks of recruits who are willing to act as human bombs, they have not elaborated on the emotional dynamics of this relationship. Fattah and Fierke begin their discussion with an analytical assumption of a prior equilibrium. “Within this equilibrium, all humans have identity and a degree of agency measured in self-respect, trust in their social world and thereby a sense of safety” (71). Both humiliation and betrayal involve a lowering or a loss in relation to this equilibrium, although in different ways. Paul Saurette explains that humiliation takes place within a relationship, where one party, who expects a higher status, is lowered in status and feels shame or a loss of self-respect.⁴² Fattah and Fierke clarify that in Arab culture, humiliation shares a family resemblance with shame, and is exacerbated by its public exposure, and subsequent transformation into humiliation:

“in Arabic, *Dhul*, the word for humiliation means

⁴¹ Stephen Rice, “Emotions and Terrorism Research: A Case for a Social-Psychological Agenda,” *Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 37, Issue 3 (May-June 2009)

⁴² Paul Saurette, *The Kantian Imperative: Humiliation, Common Sense, Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 12.

dropping to one's knees before someone stronger. A *dhalil* (humiliated person) is lowly and abject. The authors clarify that in Arabic texts, the term is often followed by two other words 'Mahanah' (degradation) and 'Esteslaam' (surrender)". (72)

Betrayal on the other hand, according to Fattah and Fierke, involves silence and secrecy, and an attempt to wipe an act from the historical record:

In the Arab Middle East, the word betrayal is often used in relation to the displacement of Palestinians from their land...While humiliating acts, for instance, at Israeli checkpoints, constitute the daily experience of Palestinians within the occupied territories, the larger betrayal is the ongoing attempt to eliminate the voice and historical record of the Palestinians... Betrayal is also used in relation to the failure of the international community to come to the aid of Palestinians...or the failure of Arab rulers in the region to protect their citizens. (73)

Fattah and Fierke explain that "interactions at all levels in the Middle East, that is, the national, the regional and the international, have been experienced in terms of humiliation and betrayal" (80). Islamists were able to shape a narrative around these emotions, giving coherent meaning to the failure of secular nationalism and the widespread suffering of populations. The authors insist that there is nothing about the Arab or Islamic psyche or culture that necessarily breeds violence, "rather, the historical memory of greatness within an Islamic empire, combined with the ongoing humiliation, or lowering of value, and betrayal by regimes in the region of their promise to protect, has provided the seedbed for

Islamism to re-emerge as the basis for a transnational identity” (80). Various aspects of the emotional motivation for political violence as well as the appeal of Islamism as a transnational identity are treated in all of the novels under analysis in this thesis.

Conclusion

Terrorism discourse has roots in gothic literature and the term itself was coined in relation to the French Revolution. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the motifs of terror and terrorism in fiction portrayed a complex morality and were often self-reflective. With the onset of the Cold War, Western conception and propaganda of the communist ‘Other’ became highly politicized. This conception was conveniently transferred onto ‘International Terrorism’ with the end of the Cold War, often justifying a new mode of imperialism that had devastating effects on the Middle East and South America specifically. Fiction emerging out of the West in the 1970s mirrored these ideological changes, and focused particularly on Palestinian violence. At the same time, Middle Eastern critics like Ghassan Kanafani and Edward Said have continuously challenged this framing.

After the events of September 11th, terrorism discourse has

become more amplified and specific to Islam and the Middle East. Counter-terrorism strategies such as the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq are among the consequences of this hyper rhetoric, which tends to decontextualize violence and perceive it as simply evil. This simplification has had catastrophic impacts on Middle Eastern and Islamic societies, but has also turned anti-terrorism campaigns into instances of state-terrorism and state-sponsored terrorism, which are essentially counterproductive. Western fictional responses after 9/11, on the whole, respond to and mirror this rhetoric while Middle Eastern fiction of the same period has yet to be thoroughly explored within criticism; or worse, has been critically coerced into the existing rhetoric.

Fortunately, many political scientists, historians, and literary critics have contributed a plethora of works that challenge terrorism rhetoric and carefully examine different frames of political violence such as the historical, economic, and emotional. These efforts form the basis of this research. It is the contention of this thesis that Middle Eastern fiction dealing with instances of political violence in a post 9/11 clime can expand our understanding of the forms that global power have taken, and can, in the words of Joseba Zulaika help us avoid “another stupefying period of fear and violence” (1).

CHAPTER II

The Yacoubian Building

Gabriel García Márquez once said that if you want to make a political point, write a good book.⁴³ This saying holds particularly true for Egyptian author, political columnist and activist Alaa Al Aswany and his novel, *The Yacoubian Building* (2002), which was translated into English in 2004 by Humphrey T. Davies. Al-Aswany is often hailed as Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz's successor and among the most acclaimed Middle Eastern writers today. He is also one of the founding members of the grassroots coalition Egyptian Movement for Change or *Kefaya* as it is more commonly known, and had a major role in the revolution of 2011, which toppled the Mubarak regime. In his pre-revolutionary novel the author exposes the complex and interconnected nature of the Egyptian, particularly Cairene, social fabric in the 1990s, under the rule of president Hosni Mubarak. The novel was the best-selling Arabic novel for five years and is currently in its ninth edition, and has been translated into 23 languages. It was also adapted into a film in 2006 and a miniseries in 2007. The prominence of the novel can be

⁴³Alaa Al Aswany, "Alaa Al Aswany: Voice of Reason", interview by Karen Kostyal, *National Geographic Interactive Edition*, September 2006, accessed August 2013, <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0609/voices.html>. Subsequent reference in text.

largely attributed to the author's humane and humorous style, which is utilized to voice a realistic and biting condemnation of some of the ugliest facets of modern Egyptian history: corruption and religious fanaticism.⁴⁴ In an interview with Karen Kostyal in 2006 the author notes that his intention was not to write a political novel, but rather to discover characters that by default "have inside themselves many political and social issues". Critic Ziad Elmarsafy describes the novel as a work of realist fiction and suggests that as such, it is a viable means of political resistance.⁴⁵ In other words, though the author does not intentionally write a political novel, the realism and authenticity of his portrayal of Egypt's political problems in itself is an example of the utilization of fiction for the means of political resistance against a corrupt state system. The title, *The Yacoubian Building*, refers to an actual edifice in downtown Cairo built in 1937, located on No. 34 Talaat Harb Street, an offshoot of the now famous Tahrir Square. The once chic, now completely rundown building serves as a metaphor for Cairo's own deterioration. Utilizing the building metaphor to represent the state (as Naguib Mahfouz had done in his novel *Miramar* [1967]), *The Yacoubian Building* presents the intertwined lives of six main

⁴⁴ Saad Eddin Ibrahim, "Egypt's Tortured Present," *Foreign Policy* 148 (May-Jun. 2005): 78-80.
<http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/30048017?uid=3738432&uid=2&uid=4&sid=21102434547801>

⁴⁵ Karima Laachir and Saeed Talajooy, *Resistance in Contemporary Middle Easter Cultures: Literature, Cinema, and Music* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 19.

characters who inhabit the building and represent various segments of Egyptian society. A non-judgmental omniscient narrator, who seems to have a cross sectional perspective on the building and on the characters within it, tells the story, while the characters themselves are often allowed to express themselves in instances of direct free speech which shed light on their own frustrated and at times violent reactions to state corruption and despotism.

Early on in the novel the omniscient narrator reflects on the changes taking place in the building over a period of seven decades. This reflection contextualizes the scene and allows readers to view the conditions of the building and of those within it as a result of an accumulation of political policies that have had ruinous economic and social ramifications. According to the narrator, in the 1930s “the cream of the society of those days took up residence in the [...] building—ministers, big land-owning bashas, foreign manufacturers, and two Jewish millionaires”.⁴⁶ The roof of the building consisted of fifty small iron rooms, one for each apartment, which were no more than two meters by two meters. These rooms were used for storage of foodstuffs, the kennelling of dogs or laundering clothes. Through reference to the functionality of these rooms the novel points to the affluent, prosperous, and

⁴⁶ Alaa Al-Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building* (Cairo: Matbouly Publishers, 2002), 12. Subsequent reference in text.

cosmopolitan period of the thirties and forties, under the monarchy of King Farouk. The presence of British colonial social structures in Egypt, the end of World War II, and the establishment of the state of Israel in the Middle East mark this period. According to the novel, in the 1950s, the revolution came “and everything changed. The exodus of the Jews and foreigners started and every apartment that was vacated... was taken over by an officer of the armed forces, who were the influential people of the time” (12). This change refers to the military coup of 1952 that was undertaken by Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Free Officers. The popular coup overthrew King Farouk and the feudal system. It also ended colonial British military presence in the country. Egypt was declared a republic and embraced socialist, nationalist and secular state policies. According to Steven Cook the officers’ plan was to undertake reform rather than regime change, but that they “had no program, no means, and no framework of thought to turn abstract notions about reform into reality”.⁴⁷ Another problematic that Osman Tarek notes in *Egypt on the Brink* is that land reform, the spreading of the public sector, as well as the call for Arab nationalism should have evolved more slowly. In fact, “the speed of these social changes outpaced the development of Egyptian society

⁴⁷ Steven A. Cook, *The Struggle For Egypt: From Nasser to Tahrir Square* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 39.

and people".⁴⁸ In the novel the ensuing social changes are mirrored in the shifting function of the rooftop rooms of the Yacoubian Building:

By the 1960s half the apartments were lived in by officers of various ranks... the officers' wives began using the iron rooms in a different way: for the first time they were turned into places for the stewards, cooks, and young maids that they brought from the villages to serve their families to stay in. Some of the officers' wives were of plebeian origin and could see nothing wrong in raising small animals... in the iron rooms. (12-13)

The power shift that accompanied a military coup d'état influenced the social order in a variety of ways; distinguished among them is the rising rank of those in the military and the immigration of plebeian customs and traditions to an otherwise modern and cosmopolitan city and to the Yacoubian Building. More critically, Tarek explains that the lack of institutionalization and the personification of the Nasserite project made it easy for his successors, Sadat and Mubarak, to steer the country away from it (79). For example by the early 1980s president Anwar El Sadat:

Abolished Nasser's socialism; altered Egypt's strategic orientation from Arab Nationalism and a close friendship with the USSR to an alliance with the United States; shunned progressive revolutionism and joined Saudi-led Arab conservatism; diluted the public sector in favor of a resurgent capitalism; and reversed the regime's relationship with its people: from a bottom-up legitimacy based on the masses' consent to top-down imposition of power. (79)

⁴⁸ Osman Tarek, *Egypt on the Brink: From the Rise of Nasser to the Fall of Mubarak* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 79. Subsequent reference in text.

In the novel, the narrator reveals the effects of policies of economic liberalization propagated by Sadat. He explains that in the 1970s the well to do started to leave the downtown area in favor of newer neighborhoods like Mohandessin and Madinet Nasr. They either sold their apartments in the Yacoubian Building or started using them as offices and clinics for their recently graduated sons, or renting them furnished to Arab tourists. "The result was that the connections between the iron rooms and the building's apartments were gradually severed, and the former stewards and servants ceded them for money to new, poor residents" (13). The narrator presents the economic outcomes of Sadat's capitalist policies on two fronts: the widening gap between the rich and the poor and the continual influx of rural labor into Cairo in search of work and better living conditions. The narrator also explains that in the wake of the 1990s and after a decade of the Mubarak regime these conditions are only exacerbated:

The final outcome was the growth of a new community on the roof that was entirely independent of the rest of the building. Some of the newcomers rented two rooms next to one another and made a small residence out of them with all utilities... while others, the poorest, collaborated to create a shared latrine for every three or four rooms, the roof community thus coming to resemble any other community in Egypt". (14)

James Buchan in his critique of the novel explains that the changing political players within this period of seven decades, be they the

British, the monarchy, the Nasserists, the clergy or the nouveaux rich, are all responsible for the subsequent obliteration of political probity and sexual virtue; two elements that embody the state of Egyptian affairs under the Mubarak regime.⁴⁹

The characters of the novel, their frustrations, and the banality of their circumstances directly point to this wretched obliteration of political and sexual integrity, which is presented as a joint national experience. The narrative is built around a compendium of six major characters whose lives are interwoven through their shared living space. Readers are initially introduced to the oldest resident of the building, Zaki Bey el Dessouki. Zaki Bey is a wealthy and elderly foreign-educated engineer who spends most of his time pursuing women and being mistreated by them. He personifies the cosmopolitan, cultured, and not particularly religious ruling class prior to the Revolution. Another resident of the building is Hagg Muhammad Azzam. Azzam is portrayed as one of Egypt's wealthiest men and a migrant to Cairo from the countryside. Initially a shoe shiner, Azzam made millions on the back of his clandestine activities as a drug dealer. He utilizes a religious façade to veil his immorality. In the novel he realizes his goal of serving in

⁴⁹ James Buchan, "A Street in the Sky," *The Guardian*, 17 February 2007, accessed 23 August 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/feb/17/fiction.featuresreviews>. Subsequent reference in text.

the People's Assembly, but comes face to face with the enormous corruption of contemporary Egyptian politics. He also marries a young second wife, a widow who he forces to abandon her son as a prerequisite for the marriage. When she falls pregnant Azzam forces her to abort her unborn child. Another tenant is Hatim Rasheed, editor of *Le Caire*, a French language daily newspaper. Rasheed is the son of an Egyptian legal scholar and a French mother. In the novel he is portrayed as a fairly open homosexual in a society that either looks the other way or condemns such behavior. Rasheed recounts how he was sexually abused as a child. At the end of the novel he dies tragically when he is stabbed and robbed by his lover. Among the roof dwellers is Malak, a Coptic Christian character who is a shirt-maker and petty schemer seeking to open a shop on the Yacoubian's roof and then to wheedle himself into one of the more posh apartments downstairs. Other rooftop dwellers include Taha el Shazli, the son of the building doorman. Taha is presented as a studious and pious young man, who has ambitions to be admitted to the Police Academy. When Taha is refused admission to the academy solely based on his father's occupation, he is disillusioned and eventually joins a militant Islamist organization modeled upon the Jamaa Islamiya. Taha is in a relationship with another rooftop dweller, Buthayna el Sayed. While initially childhood sweethearts, Buthayna is confronted with a harsh reality when she is forced to find a job to

help support her family after her father's death. Quickly she realizes that her employer expects sexual favors from her and other female coworkers in exchange for additional money and gifts, and also that her mother expects her to preserve her virginity while not refusing her boss's sexual advances outright. Disaffected, she calls off her engagement to Taha but finds herself falling in love with the romantic father figure Zaki Bey, whom she'd been planning to scam with Malak the Shirt-maker. Other secondary characters are Zaki Bey's embittered sister Dawlat who throws him out of their shared apartment, a French singer Christine who is an old lover and good friend of Zaki Bey, as well as Kamal el Fouli, a corrupt politician who fixes elections for Azzam in return for a hefty bribe and who demonstrates that government officials are aware of Azzam's drug trade but are willing to look the other way if they are adequately compensated. In these harsh socio-political circumstances where there seems to be no chances of mobility or change the characters are all disenchanted and each is tragically drawn to an outlet. Buchan explains that, "Even Islamic militancy, or what the Egyptians call jihad, is just a drug like Black Label whisky or picking up police recruits or dope or groping young women on crowded buses in Tahrir Square". In this case, Buchan suggests that violence, be it political or sexual in the Egyptian context is a drug meant to numb individuals against the harsh reality of their lives.

In the novel political and sexual violence and the appeal of religious fanaticism in response to state policies are represented most thoroughly through the character of Taha El Shazli, who at the end of the novel executes a political assassination. This chapter will focus on the character of Taha to demonstrate the motivations presented by the author that lead a young man to commit political violence in the Egyptian context. Readers are first introduced to the character of Taha through the voice of the omniscient narrator, and through free indirect discourse readers are quickly engaged in the inner cognitions and dreams of Taha, the son of a doorkeeper living on the roof of the Yacoubian Building. At first encounter, Taha is presented as a pious and dedicated young man who dreams of social mobility. He is awake at the break of dawn, having spent the night “sleepless with anxiety”; Taha performs the dawn prayers, plus the supererogatory prostrations, and begins reading from the Book of Answered Prayer (16). The cause for his anxiety is related to the question of fate since in a few hours he will have to present himself to the character interview at the Police Academy (16). Taha’s hard work and prayers suggest that he believes that his fate is controlled by three elements: by his personal effort in realizing his dream and by God’s support (both elements within his area of influence), but more specifically by the results of the character interview (an aspect which is out of his area of

influence). It is precisely this lack of control over his fate that causes his anxiety. Readers also learn that in order to ensure acceptance to the college, the children of the well-to-do usually pay a bribe of twenty thousand pounds, roughly three thousand US dollars. This suggests that in Mubarak's Egypt initial financial prowess offers continued opportunities of success. The narrator maintains that Taha wished he possessed such a sum; in other words that he possessed the financial means to influence and control his future.

For Taha the idea of enrolling into the Police Academy represents the possibility of social mobility: an idea that is propagated by remnant state propaganda of Nasserite ideologies such as free education and equal opportunity. Egyptian academic and author Amira Nowaira explains that while Nasser's regime created a free system of education that acknowledged the rightful aspirations of the masses for a better future through education, subsequent governments continued to pay only lip service to the principle: "they left it like an ailing invalid without a proper supply of oxygen, perhaps hoping it might eventually collapse and die a natural death".⁵⁰ The deterioration of Nasser's concept was initiated on

⁵⁰ Amira Nowaira, "Nostalgia for Egypt's Nasser," *The Guardian*, 30 Sep, 2010, accessed 5 Aug 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/sep/30/nasser-egypt-death-nostalgia>

two fronts. On the one hand, resources allocated to education gradually diminished, turning teachers to private tutoring for a fee and lowering the quality of in-class education. On the other hand, limited employment opportunities created a situation in which even university graduates rarely have a chance to improve their circumstances, or even work in their specific fields. Bassma Kodami explains that even though the Mubarak regime drastically changed the social, economic, and political direction since the Nasser era,

It has not paid much attention to the need to devise a new societal model or to develop a new political discourse to mobilize support. Survival seems to be its main ethos and concern, and societal demands for some political or moral direction have been largely ignored.⁵¹

This situation creates a rift between individuals' expectations of what is promised and the hard reality of what can actually be achieved. The resultant phenomenon of a growing class of *educated poor* also forms a new segment in the society: individuals who are frustrated and uncomfortably belong to neither the lower or middle segment of society. It is exactly this segment of society whose frustration and resentments are captured in the depiction of Taha. In the novel residents of the Yacoubian Building, who are themselves a new revolutionary upper class would:

⁵¹ Bassma Kodami, "The Dangers of Political Exclusion: Egypt's Islamist Problem," *Carnegie Papers Middle East Series*, No. 63 (October 2005), <http://carnegieendowment.org>, Subsequent reference in text.

Insult [Taha] deliberately and unmistakably in order to push him into responding that he would not put up with such insults because he was an educated person, which would be their golden opportunity to announce to him the truth—that here he was a mere doorkeeper, no more and no less, and if he didn't like his job he should leave it to someone who needed it. (18)

The novel indicates that social and state failures are the result of a double standard, in which theories are preached but not practiced.

In the second segment in the narrative of Taha el Shazli readers learn through Taha's cognitions that according to his officer friends the Police Academy character interview is no more than a formality "...carried out for appearance's sake, either to exclude radical elements (based on the National Security Service Reports) or to confirm the acceptance of those blessed with influential friends"(57). Readers also learn that Taha is given the questions for the test in advance and that he had in preparation memorized the model answers for them. At the end of the questioning Taha awaits the order to be dismissed but to his surprise the presiding general suddenly "discovers something" in his application (58). The dialogue that follows between Taha and the presiding general is a turning point in the narrative:

...[The presiding general] raised the sheet of paper a little to make sure of what he had read, then asked Taha, avoiding his eyes, "Your father—what's his profession, Taha?"
"Civil servant, sir."

...“Civil servant or property guard?”

Taha said nothing for a moment. Then he said in a low voice, “My father is a property guard, sir.”

The presiding general smiled and looked embarrassed. Then he bent over the papers, carefully wrote something on them, raised his head with the same smile, and said, “Thanks, son. Dismissed.” (58)

Taha is dismissed for the sole reason that his father is a doorkeeper. In this case, not only are the residents of the building’s fears of his social advancement unjustified, but also the state is the actual impediment to this social advancement. Taha and Busayna point out the frustration this kind of situation creates in a dialogue. Taha maintains: “I can’t let them get away with it. I must make a complaint” (59). In response Busayna questions him: “Complain about who and to who?” (60). In fact Kodami explains that since 1981 the Mubarak regime policy was to keep institutions that might prove a threat to its authority under its control, including the press, labor unions, and universities. It controlled the press through chief editors who remain in the same position for decades and exercise a level of censorship some describe as unprecedented in Egypt. Kodmani adds that, “as the strategy has become gradually institutionalized and effectively internalized by society, open confrontation has been reduced to a minimum”. Busayna’s earlier response therefore crystalizes a common state of helplessness that characterizes the Egyptian population in its dealings with the state.

In the absence of viable political or social institutions and in a state fraught with economic hardships and corruption, the novel presents Islamism as a transnational identity and a refuge. When Taha applies to the faculty of Economics and Political Science at Cairo University, a faculty described in the novel as associated in people's minds with affluence, he is made further aware of the rigidity of the Egyptian social construct. On his first day of studies, the narrator explains that Taha is alienated from his fellow students due to his own insecurities: he begins to regard his clothes, blue jeans and a white T-shirt, as an inappropriate and cheap attempt to be original (90). He decides not to get to know anyone, since "getting to know people meant exchanging personal details and he might be standing in the midst of a group of colleagues (including girls, maybe) and one of them would ask him what his father did" (90). This desire to isolate himself later leads to feelings of fear when Taha begins to question whether one of the students sitting in the hall is one of the residents of the Yacoubian building "and Taha might have bought him a pack of cigarettes once or washed his car" (90). The rigid social order in the lecture halls puts Taha in a certain physical space as early as the first day of classes, and it is within that space that Taha becomes introduced and more susceptible to a rejection of society and an embrace of religion as a possible answer to his social dilemma. In fact when

“the call to the noon prayer rang out and a number of students rose to pray, Taha followed these to the faculty’s mosque and noticed with relief that like him they were poor, most of them being apparently of rural origin” (90). Taha is quickly integrated into the mosque community and after every Thursday evening prayer, a group of good-hearted, pious, and poor country boys would stay up chatting and discussing various issues (91). Within these meetings the government is portrayed as heathen. For example Taha,

...learned for the first time that Egyptian society was at the same stage that had prevailed before Islam and it was not an Islamic society because the ruler stood in the way of the application of God’s Law, while God’s prohibitions were openly flouted and the law of the state permitted alcohol, fornication, and usury. He learned too the meaning of communism, which was against religion, and of the crimes committed by the Abd el Nasser regime against the Muslim Brothers. (92)

This section highlights an interesting interplay between the government and the religious institution. In reality the Mubarak regime accommodated the relative freedom of expression that existed in the space of the mosque to provide an outlet for dissent, but also to use its confrontation of Islamist groups to justify the perpetuation of its authoritarian structures. Kodami explains that:

The government will do everything to protect its vital interests but is willing to allow the religious establishment to take control over issues it considers to be of secondary importance... what constitutes its vital interests includes its physical security and its image in the eyes of foreign allies and international financial institutions. (10-11)

Kaira Abaza adds that the state has been using religion as a political instrument since the 1970s:

In the 1970s the aim was to counter the left; in the 1980s there was an attempt at co-opting Islamist political groups within the fringes of formal politics; and in the 1990s there was an attempt at containing the Islamist challenge (of both violent and nonviolent groups), as well as legitimizing authoritarian politics.⁵²

Given that religious rhetoric and clerics were given a space of political freedom under the Mubarak regime, the mosque emerged as a space for political dissent and it is no surprise that religious groups were perceived as the only tolerated opposition to the state.

In the context of the mosque Taha finds a refuge, a community and a common enemy, but more importantly he finds a setting where he can freely vent his frustration and anger against the state. This new physical and psychological space affords Taha a new and more empowered identification, he begins by taking on religion as a physical identifier, and this shift has consequences on his outlook and mannerisms. The novel identifies these changes in appearance:

⁵² Kairi Abaza, "Political Islam and Regime Survival in Egypt," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, No. 51 (January 2006): www.washingtoninstitute.org

...the Islamic dress that he adopted in place of his Western clothes... his beard, which he has let grow and which gives him a dignified and impressive appearance greater than his real age... the small space for prayer that he has set up next to the elevator in the lobby of the building, where he takes turns in giving the call to prayer with another bearded brother who is an engineering student and lives on the fifth floor. (115)

The reference to his 'bearded brother' who is a resident in the building also demonstrates some of the social changes that Taha is undergoing. The resident is an equal, a brother in religion regardless of economic differences. This new physical shift allows for an emotional shift as well: "Gone forever are the old cringing timidity and meekness before the residents. Now he faces them with self-confidence. He no longer cares a hoot for what they think" (115). The main reason for this new feeling of adequacy and equality is explained in the novel through the idea of loving or hating people "in God" –which is advocated to Taha by the Sheikh in the faculty mosque, Sheikh Shakir–meaning that people are too lowly in their own right to be loved or hated for their worldly characteristics, and instead should be evaluated according to the degree of their observance of God's law (115-116). This new mode of valuation has a positive impact on Taha's character, in the sense that he begins to feel empowered and worthy regardless of his social standing, specifically because the level of his observance of God's will is within his sphere of control and does not depend on money, the state, or state services.

In the novel *Al Aswany* also suggests parallels between private experiences and demoralizing and violent political realities in the Middle East, which push Taha out of the private space of the building and the mosque and into a more public/political domain. This is exemplified in the discussion between Taha and Sheikh Shakir concerning his sweetheart Busayna, whose rejection of him is channeled into his rejection of the foreign policies of the state. When Taha appeals to the Sheikh for advice on his romantic problem the Sheikh responds:

Yesterday the filthy war began, with our rulers allowing themselves to be forced into fighting Muslims under the command of unbelievers. It is the duty of every Muslim in Egypt to rise up against this unbelieving government. Are you willing, Taha, to hang back in aiding the Muslims, who are being killed in their thousands every day, and occupy yourself with an erring young woman who has deserted you in favor of abomination? (121)

In this case the Sheikh is referring to the Gulf War of 1990-1991 and Egypt's role of providing 35,000 troops within the US-led coalition against Iraq. Tarek Ismael notes that Egyptian civil society, including the leftist and the Islamists, contested every aspect of the official reading of the crisis and its consequences, perceiving it as a strike at an Arab power and the strengthening of Israeli-US hold on the area.⁵³ The Sheikh describes the war as filthy

⁵³ Tareq Youssief Ismael, *The Gulf War and the New World Order: International Relations of the Middle East* (Florida, University Press of

and the government as unbelievers because Egypt's involvement was perceived by many political factions at the time as colluding with the US and Israel against Iraq, and facilitating a doctrine of the New World Order. Noam Chomsky explains that the pretext of the war, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, was considered a crime of independence, which threatened US influence in the Middle East and could not be tolerated.⁵⁴ Chomsky explains that Washington had dismissed any peaceful means to end the conflict and that their tactic was to pulverize the Third World peasant army after months of disinformation about its artillery, sophisticated defenses, chemical weapons, and other fantastic capacities. This aspect of Egypt's foreign policy is perceived as a betrayal and provided a rationale for the opposition that largely saw the government as unbelievers, collaborators, or puppets. In the novel, the sheikh introduces Taha to an impending demonstration against the war and gives him a copy of the Islamic Action Charter. This instance marks the beginning of Taha's involvement in Egyptian political life.

In the novel, and during the demonstration, a new character,

Florida, 1994), 408-409.

⁵⁴ Noam Chomsky, "What we Say Goes: The Middle East in the New World Order," *Z Magazine*, May 1991, accessed 6 Aug, 2013, <http://www.chomsky.info/articles/199105--.htm>

Brother Tahir, the emir of the Gamaa Islamiya, voices some of the concerns of political Islamists concerning the Gulf War. He states that:

The tragedy was made complete when our rulers submitted to the orders of America and Israel and instead of the armies of the Muslims turning their weapons on the Zionists who have usurped Palestine and befouled the El Aqsa Mosque, our rulers have issued orders to Egyptian troops to kill their Muslim brothers and sisters in Iraq. (141)

In this case, brother Tahir voices the then common and sinister realization of the leftists and the Islamists that governmental submission to western domination and lack of integrity betrays all ideals of pan-Arabism and Islamism. According to authors Khaled Fattah and K.M. Fierke markers of the Islamist narrative are the Crusades, the memory of a glorious empire, the subsequent construction of secular nation-states and the 'Middle East', and the various international agreements, from Sykes–Picot to the Balfour Declaration to the UN Partition Plan for Palestine. This narrative revolves around the United States, the main international actor, Israel, and on the US-supported Arab regimes, most of them oil producers and police states that rely heavily on a draconian security apparatus to stay in power. In the novel, readers learn through the ensuing student demonstration that the concerns voiced by Brother Tahir are legitimate concerns capable of rallying the Egyptian public and causing general public dissent. Readers

also learn that when the demonstrating students go out into the streets so that other people could join them, “the Central Security forces were waiting for them in front of the university and the moment the students went out into the square, the soldiers... attacked them and started beating them savagely” (142). The novel thus presents the students as crossing an invisible line by leaving the contained space of (prearranged) political freedom within the university and crossing into the streets of Cairo. Kodmani affirms that, “sources of threat [to the state] are the Islamist extremists on one hand, and the young crowds that can fill the streets with any political demand on the other hand. Individuals who are identified as agitators capable of mobilizing crowds are closely watched and harshly treated even when they have no Islamist affiliation” (11). In the novel Al Aswany highlights the harsh treatment of those demonstrators:

The screams of the female students rose and many students fell and were beaten, their blood flowing over the asphalt, but the masses of students kept pouring in huge numbers through the gate and many got away, bursting out and running far away from the soldiers, who chased after them. These students managed to get past the square in front of the university and reformed at the bridge. Additional platoons of Central Security soldiers fell on them, but they charged in their hundreds towards the Israeli embassy and there large numbers of Special Forces troops started firing tear gas grenades at the students, the pall of gas rising till it covered the whole scene. Then the second heavy gunfire rang out. (142)

These scenes in fact reflect real life events that took place in February 1991 in Cairo. According to Human Rights Watch reports, the Egyptian authorities' use of deadly force against student demonstrators in 1991 in Cairo University demonstrations resulted in the death of four students and the injury of dozens of others, among other similar incidents that took place throughout the year.⁵⁵ Al Aswany also later personalizes this scene of collective violence, when Taha is taken into police custody. The irony in this case is that a young man who had dreamed of becoming a police officer radically and through interaction with the state is transformed into a threat to national security.

According to the novel, later during the night:

[Taha] awoke to confused noises, and, opening his eyes, could distinguish shapes moving in the darkness of the room. Suddenly the light was turned on and he saw three huge men standing by the bed. One of them approached and hit him hard across the face. Then the man seized his head and turned it violently to the right and Taha saw for the first time a young officer, who asked him jeeringly, 'Are you Taha el Shazli?' (144)

At Taha's positive response, he is assaulted both verbally and physically and dragged into a police van among other student protestors. What ensues in terms of physical and mental torture is graphically described in three pages, and perhaps one of the most violent events of the novel. An excerpt of the violent scene:

⁵⁵ "Egypt," *Human Rights Watch World Report 1992*, accessed 20 Aug 2013, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1992/WR92/>. Subsequent reference in text.

...no sooner had the officer finished saying the words than the blows rained down on Taha from all sides. Then they threw him face down on the ground and several hands started to remove his gallabiya and pull off his underclothes. He resisted with all his might, but they set upon him and held his body down with their hands and feet. Two thick hands reached down, grabbed his buttocks, and pulled them apart. He felt a solid object being stuck into his rear and breaking the tendons inside and he started screaming. He screamed at the top of his voice. He screamed until he felt that his larynx was being ripped open. (153)

Authors Leonard Wantchekon and Andrew Healy explain that states endorse torture for two reasons: “as a mechanism for social control and as a method of extracting information”.⁵⁶ In the novel Taha is questioned about his affiliation with the “organization”, but more clearly, the violent rape of Taha is meant to be preventive. Wantchekon and Healy clarify that in torture “the pain of the victim spills over the entire population and is used by the state as a means to intimidate potential adversaries” (605). Ironically, the violence does not subdue Taha, but instead turns his political dissent – a desire to live a better life – into a death wish. It should be noted that Human Rights Watch reports confirm the prevalence of these instances of torture that predominantly take place in State Security Investigation Service headquarters in Lazoughly, an establishment held to be a main torture center in Cairo. According

⁵⁶ Leonard Wantchekon and Andrew Healy, “The Game of Torture,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. Vol. 43. No. 5 (Oct. 1999), 605. Subsequent reference in text.

to Fawaz A. Gerges these experiences of torture often backfire by pouring more fuel on a ranging fire.⁵⁷ Gerges explains that, “many [former Jihadis] said they were tortured in prison and far from breaking their spirit and will, torture stiffened their resolve and filled them with rage” (94). Stephen Rice confirms that feelings of impotence in the face of state violence has incited Muslims towards extremism (249).

Upon release Taha is incapable of being reincorporated into society and the controlling emotion that overtakes him is rage and a suicidal need for revenge. In a conversation with Sheikh Shakir, the Sheikh questions: “What do you want then? You don’t want to study and you don’t want to work and you don’t want to see any of your colleagues or even your family. What do you want, Taha?” (189). Taha responds: “I want to take revenge on the people who assaulted me and humiliated me” (189). In this case revenge is described as a fight against the police force, which the Sheikh explains will cost Taha his life (190). At the mention of the suicide aspect of such a struggle, Taha’s responds: “I’m dead now. They killed me in detention” (190).

⁵⁷ Fawaz A. Gerges, “Understanding the Many Faces of Islamism and Jihadism,” *Nieman Reports* (Summer 2007), accessed 15 Mar 2014, 94, <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/100207/Understanding-the-Many-Faces-of-Islamism-and-Jihadism.aspx>

The novel demonstrates that Taha's personal need for revenge against his abusers is channeled, under the tutelage of the Sheikh, into a political/religious Jihad against the state. It is precisely his suicidal tendency, born out of the shame and dehumanization of torture, which allows Sheikh Shaker to recruit Taha into a Jihadi training camp rather than Taha's prior ideological commitments. Anthropologist Talal Asad in his "Formations of the Secular" argues that what is described in the western media, as 'the Islamic roots of violence' is a misleading concept since it assumes a necessary correlation between religion and violence, where there is no such correlation.⁵⁸ The author maintains that the imperative behind so-called acts of terrorism is more often political rather than theological. In the novel, Taha's plight is initially personal and then political and finally theological. The absence of venues of social and political opposition in Egypt, channels Taha's discontent towards the only tolerated means of opposition, the religious.

The novel then delves into a description of what Shiek Shakir describes to Taha as "a journey" and what readers learn, through Taha's description, is a journey to a Jihadi training camp (191). To

⁵⁸ Talal Assad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003), 9.

begin with, the setting of the training hideout is described as modest: “The streets had the look of any urban slum –conspicuous poverty, puddles of water in the dirt lanes, small chicken and ducks running around outside the houses, small children playing barefoot, and veiled women sitting at the doors” (193). Taha’s activities in the camp are described as a strict and rigorous training:

...rising at dawn, performing the prayer, reciting the Qur’an, breakfast; then three hours of nonstop, demanding exercise (physical fitness and martial arts). After this, the brothers gathered to take classes (jurisprudence, exegesis, Qur’anic sciences, hadith) given by Sheik Bilal and other scholars. Afternoons were devoted to arms training. The brothers would board a large bus... and go into the heart of the mountains where they practiced shooting and making and using bombs. The camp’s rhythm was exhaustingly rapid and Taha had no time to think. Even in the hours set aside for chatting, after the evening prayer, the conversation of the brothers usually turned to discussion of religious issues, during which the legal proof for the infidel nature of the regime and the necessity of fighting and destroying it would be presented. (203-204)

The strict regime within the training camp includes a combination of mental and physical stimulation, which ironically might be paralleled to the kind of training that Taha would have received in the police academy. In a sense the camps function as a state within a state or a parallel state, complete with its own laws, community, military, and services. In the camps military training is targeted against the regime rather than an external force and shrouded in a rhetorical monopoly over interpretation of the Quran that justifies

such an insurrection. The regime is clearly described as “infidel” or *Kafir*, meaning without faith. However the narrator highlights on various occasions that to Taha the appeal of this fundamentalist perspective is not necessarily born out of religious fervor, but out of a personal desire for revenge. This detail is clarified for example when in his sleepless nights “a desire so burning that his body almost shuddered with the pressure would sweep over him, as he hankered for revenge and pictured himself exacting exemplary punishment from those who had tortured him and violated him” (205). The repetition of the word “him” twice in this sentence emphasizes the highly personalized nature of his pursuit. A burning desire for revenge is the driving force for his commitment to the terrorist cell. In fact:

This thirst for revenge took him over and drove him, so that he made amazing strides in the camp’s training exercises. Despite his youth he learned to beat many who had greater experience of physical combat than he, and within a few months he excelled at using regular rifles, semi-automatics, and automatics, and had learned how to make hand grenades easily as well. His rapid progress amazed all the brothers. (205)

Taha’s progress in the camp and its training tempts him to ask the “camp commander” Sheik Bilal: “ ‘So when are you going to let me participate in the Jihad?’ ” (205). The concept of jihad is actually one of the most distorted and controversial Islamic principles. In Arabic, the word’s literal meaning is ‘striving’ or ‘exerting oneself...

with regard to one's religion' ".⁵⁹ This exertion can be understood spiritually. Omar Rashied points to relevant selections of the Qur'an to explain the multivalent concept that denotes any effort in pursuit of a commendable aim. In the Koran: "Jihad is a comprehensive concept embracing peaceful persuasion (16:125), passive resistance (13:22; 23:96; 41:34) as well as armed struggle against oppression and injustice (2:193; 4:75; 8:39)" (160). Rashied argues that:

After the demise of Muhammad and the completion of the textual guidance of the Qur'an, Muslims were faced with the challenge of interpreting and applying the Islamic normative principles on conflict and violence to their own peculiar socio-historical contexts".

Rashied points out that a reductionist interpretation of jihad, though not unanimous, came to dominate subsequent Muslim juristic thinking.⁶⁰ Cook however explains that:

⁵⁹ David Cook, *Understanding Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 2005), 1-2. Subsequent reference in text.

⁶⁰ In the first three centuries of Islam the classical doctrine of jihad was forged by Muslim jurists primarily in response to the imperial politics of the 'Abbasid caliphate on the one hand and the Byzantine empire on the other, abrogating the Makkan experience and predicating itself on selected verses of the Qur'an such as, "And fight them on until there is no more oppression and tumult (*fitnah*) and religion should be for God (2: 193)", the classical scholars developed a doctrine of jihad in which the world is simply divided into a dichotomy of abodes: the territory of Islam (*dar al-islam*) and the territory of war (*dar al-harb*). In accordance with this belligerent paradigm, a permanent state of war (*jihad*) characterized relations between the two abodes. The only way a non-Muslim territory could avert a jihad was either to convert to Islam or to pay an annual tribute or poll tax (*jizyah*). The classical belief erroneously perceived jihad as the instrument of the Islamic caliphate to expand Muslim territories.

Among Muslims who acknowledge the associations of jihad with warfare, most would define the term as warfare authorized by a legitimate representative of the Muslim community for the sake of an issue that is universally, or nearly universally, acknowledged to be of critical importance for the entire community against an admitted enemy of Islam. Frequently regulations concerning its conduct are adduced to differentiate jihad from other types of warfare: these include formal announcement of the jihad and its causes; terms for its resolution prior to the commencement of hostilities; careful regard for noncombatants and their property; respect for the enemy dead; and restrictions on the type of warfare allowed. (4)

Reference to Jihad in the context of the novel, clarifies that in the training camp, political violence against the state is often wrongly framed as a religious duty. This integration of political and theological goals is not based on a literal reading of Islam, but on a flawed one. Taha's personal motivations and the Gamaa's political motivations can hardly be considered legitimate grounds for a Jihad, even within the strictly military, rather than spiritual, sense of the concept.

The last section of the novel deals with the violent act of political assassination and Taha's consequent death. When the Gamaa's Consultative Council recruits Taha for an operation he experiences great happiness. In fact, Sheikh Bilal explains that the nature of this happiness is a source of real power. The Sheikh comments:

“Bravo! God bless you and increase your faith! This is why the enemies of Islam tremble in fear of you—because you love death as they love life!” (238). This statement overtly references the phenomena of martyrdom and suicide attacks as a kind of euphoric desire for self-sacrifice at the altar of Islam. Yet Taha’s comments about an earlier death, a death of the spirit in torture, a dehumanization, clarifies that his desire for death is not necessarily a love of death, but could actually be described as a reconciliation of body and spirit. In fact, Taha clarifies on many occasions that he is incapable of living with the humiliation of torture, and exacting his revenge is the only means of regaining a sense of humanity. Therefore, the novel suggests that the risk of death is actually an attempt to restore humanity.

The operation itself involves murdering a National Security Officer as he leaves his house. Dr. Mahgoub, the emir (prince) of the group of three men performing the operation, explains to Taha that this officer Salih Rashwan “is a criminal, an unbeliever, and a butcher. He used to take pleasure in supervising the torture of Islamists and he’s the one directly responsible for the killing of many brothers in detention” (241). In fact, at the moment of the operation Taha realizes that it is the same officer who had supervised his torture. When Taha recognizes his voice:

Taha lost all awareness of what he was doing and leaped toward him, letting out an inarticulate, high-

pitched cry like an angry roar. The officer turned toward him with frightened eyes, his face pinched in terror as though he realized what was happening, and he opened his mouth to say something but couldn't because successive bursts of fire suddenly erupted from the automatic rifle, all of them striking the officer's body, and causing him to fall to the ground, the blood gushing out of him. (243)

Al Aswany's treatment of this final act of violence and his narrative choices are vital in understanding the author's position about violence in the Egyptian context. Though readers know that the act of assassination is initially premeditated against an unknown officer, when Taha recognizes the officer as his own torturer and rapist, this changes the nature of the act and depoliticizes it. The author's choice here to highlight the personal element of the conflict, stresses the reactionary nature of this violence. The power of such a narrative choice can be illuminated by considering the readers' response had this officer been an unknown entity and not the one responsible for Taha's personal suffering and torture. In this case, the violence would have seemed much more arbitrary and readers would be a lot less sympathetic to Taha. This choice, which is premeditated on the side of the author, has the implication of justifying Taha's violence as retribution rather than terrorism. At the same time this narrative choice complicates the narrative by highlighting the fact that this justification (retribution) is only accidental. The act of murder which concludes this novel implicates readers, who by the very nature of

interpretation are made to consider their own response to this violence, and to consider the extent that any officer can represent the reach of the state in terrorizing its citizens and the extent to which a part can or should represent the whole. This narrative choice can be paralleled to Joseph Conrad's murder scene in *The Secret Agent* when Winnie stabs Verloc, and Conrad distorts her face, turning it into that of Stevie, thus parodying a revenger's tragedy. Both authors, one literally and the other symbolically reinforce the aspect of revenge to complicate the morality of the crime.

The narration of Taha's subsequent death is described in an equally ambiguous manner:

Something unexpected occurred, however. He was getting close to the truck, the bullets flying around him like rain, but when he got within two meters he felt a coldness in his shoulder and chest, a coldness that burned like ice and took him by surprise. He looked at his body and saw the blood spurting from his wounds and the coldness was transformed into sharp pain that seized him in its teeth. He fell to the ground next to the rear wheel of the truck and screamed. Then it seemed to him as though the agony was diminishing little by little and he felt a strange restfulness engulfing him and taking him up into itself. A babble of distant sounds came to his ears—bells and sounds of recitation and melodious murmurs—repeating themselves and drawing close to him, as though welcoming him into a new world. (243)

At this point in the narrative Al Aswany involves readers who are made to face their own cognitions concerning the character of

Taha, and consider which is the more tragic, the assassination that he carries out or his subsequent death, or actually whether both deaths are tragic or neither? The humanization of Taha complicates his characterization. Taha is a perpetrator of political violence, perhaps he could also be considered a terrorist in the most traditional sense, but in the novel he is also a victim of a corrupt state system and his violence is not wholly irrational. According to the narrator it seems that to Taha his death is an act of martyrdom, a sweet release, and an end to his agony. The narrator clarifies that a babble of distant sound came to Taha's ears, bells and sounds of recitation, melodious murmurs welcoming him to a new world. These references could point to Taha's religious expectations of what is often described as the martyr's wedding: celebrations that memorialize the martyr through ritualized performances based on the belief that every martyr is rewarded 72 black-eyed virgin brides in Paradise. The reference to recitation and melodious murmurs could also refer to the notion that in the final moments of death one's life flashes before one's eyes, yet in this case Taha imagines scenes of what could have been: celebrations of his admission to the police academy and/or his wedding to his sweetheart Busayna, for example. These two joyous occasions could have provided Taha an alternative life, but these simple dreams can only be achieved in a 'new world'. It is clear that at the end and in death Taha is happy to

transcend to a 'new world' and to leave this world of the Camp, the Mosque, the University, and the Yacoubian Building behind him. The novel's reference to a 'new world' and one that comes after death, could be read in retrospect as foreshadowing the Egyptian Revolution in 2011 which toppled the Mubarak government with millions of calls for secular demands such as "Bread, Freedom, and Social Justice". A post-2011 reading of this novel tempts readers to consider and evaluate now and in the long run the necessary changes in the Egyptian political, economic, and social fabric, that would allow characters like Taha and others in their millions to pursue a normal life away from the appeals of religious fanaticism and contempt for the state.

Conclusion

In *The Yacoubian Building* Al-Aswany does not make any direct references to terrorism, though the events, characters, and activities that are referenced in the novel point to the Gamaa Islamiya in the 1990s. The Gamaa Islamiya is an actual Egyptian Sunni Islamic movement that was conceived in the 1970s among university students and aimed at overthrowing the Egyptian government and replacing it with an Islamic state. The international community has considered the Gamaa a terrorist

organization since 2001. John L. Esposito in *Unholy War* explains that the Gamaa began,

as student Islamic groups active on university campuses and has evolved into a terrorist network. It became an umbrella organization for violent extremists' clandestine cells... it attracted younger, less-educated followers from more desperate conditions of poverty and unemployment who espoused a more radical ideology and engaged in more random acts of violence to destabilize the government politically and economically.⁶¹

Political scientist Gilles Kepel in *The War on Muslim Minds: Islam and the West* further explains that:

The Gamaa's strategy in Egypt during the 1990s was guerilla warfare at close quarters: stalking and assassinating representatives of authority, Egyptian Christians, tourists... as well as other nearby targets. Gamaa Islamiyaa caused about a thousand deaths before the group's leading emirs called for the cessation of armed struggle, following the November 1997 massacre of fifty-eight tourists in Luxor. That senseless act had cut Gamaa Islamiyaa off from the last remnants of its popular support.⁶²

Al-Aswany's reference to this group, particularly in the period of the 1990s when the narrative is set, focuses on the militant aspect of Taha's involvement. The author could have referenced the more popular Muslim Brotherhood instead to denote the larger ideology of political Islamism. Instead the focus is on violent retaliation

⁶¹ John L. Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 92.

⁶² Gilles Kepel, *The War on Muslim Minds: Islam and the West*. Trans. Pascale Ghazalah (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 82.

against the state in the form of an assassination of an authority figure.

In the novel there is one reference to the term Islamists and another to the term Jihad. The term Islamists appears in the novel when the emir of the Gamaa justifies the assassination of a National Security officer by claiming that he tortured and killed many “Islamists” in prison. In this case, Jihadist groups use a general reference to the torture of Islamists to justify violence against the state. This reference to other Islamists, however, blurs the ideological lines between these different groups and deconstructs American foreign policy that insists that: “Jihadists loathe the Muslim Brotherhood (known in Arabic as al-Ikhwan al-Muslimeen) for rejecting global jihad and embracing democracy. These positions seem to make them moderates, the very thing the United States, short on allies in the Muslim world, seeks”.⁶³

Many Egyptian and Muslim readers would consider Taha’s utilization of the term Jihad problematic since some of the main criteria justifying a violent Jihad are not met. Chief among these is the lack of universality of the demands of the Gamaa Islamiyaa and

⁶³ Robert S. Leiken and Steven Brooke, “The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood,” *Foreign Affairs*, March-April 2007, accessed on 30 Mar, 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/62453/robert-s-leiken-and-steven-brooke/the-moderate-muslim-brotherhood>

other radical groups. This fact can be illustrated by the results of Egypt's first multi-candidate elections in 2012, in which the two major Islamist representatives gained a combined forty-three percent of the total votes in the first round, whereas the combined votes of the three major secular nominees were fifty-six percent. These results demonstrate that within Egypt, right wing rhetoric in the form of political Islamism is not universal or even representing the majority. In the novel readers also know from the omniscient narrator that Taha's motivations continue to be personal and concern revenge against the state. Dubbing this personal concern as grounds for a jihad is symptomatic of a general utilization of religious rhetoric for personal and political benefits in the Egyptian context.

Al-Aswany's presentation of Taha's journey towards violence can best be described as quintessentially emotional. This journey begins with a sense of humiliation and a betrayal by the state that is meant to support and protect its citizens. Taha's humiliation as a result of violent torture at the hands of the state then moves him to experience rage. The word "rage" is actually used in descriptions of Taha in the Jihadi camp. Hannah Arendt in *On Violence* relates violence to rage and argues that both rage and the violence that goes with it belong to a group of natural human

emotions.⁶⁴ She explains that reacting with rage is directly related to a sense of injustice. Arendt explains that:

To resort to violence when confronted with outrageous events or conditions is enormously tempting because of its inherent immediacy and swiftness... under certain circumstances violence—acting without argument or speech and without counting the consequences—is the only way to set the scales of justice right again. (63-64)

Arendt claims that resorting to violence in the face of outrageous events or conditions might be in conflict with constitutions of civilized communities. However that does not mean that they are inhumane or necessarily irrational. In fact the author argues that rage and the violence that sometimes goes with it “belong among the “natural” *human* emotions, and to cure man of them would mean nothing less than to dehumanize or emasculate him” (64). In this sense, Taha’s violence is an expression of his humanity and can be read as a reaction to state policies and practices that attempt to dehumanize and humiliate him.

⁶⁴ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1970), 63. Subsequent reference in text.

CHAPTER III

Snow

Snow (2002) is the seventh novel by Turkish author Orhan Pamuk, and has been described by Rita Sakr as his most overtly political novel.¹ In “Between Terror and Taboo” Sakr explains that Pamuk’s body of work “...negotiates Turkey’s contested cultural and political spaces, the over determined texture of its history and cultural memory, and the controversial facets of its contemporary national and international geopolitical concerns” (227). Turkey is a secular state located at the crossroads between Western Asia and southeastern Europe, with a majority Muslim population. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the modern Kemalist republic in 1923, a 1928 amendment to the constitution removed the provision declaring the religion of the state as Islam. However Udo Steinbach explains that, “Turkish secularism does not mean separation of state and religion. There is no such separation... The state controls religion... to make sure that Islam [does] not disturb the Kemalist project of modernization, understood as

¹ Rita Sakr “Between Terror and Taboo: Monumentalisation as the Matrix of History and Politics in Orhan Pamuk’s *The Black Book* and *Snow*,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 38 No. 2, (2011) 237, doi: 10.1080/13530194.2011.581821. Subsequent reference in text.

Europeanization or Westernization”.² Fikret Erkut Emcioğlu adds that, “after the introduction of the multiparty democratic system in 1946, the struggle between hardline Kemalists and others—liberals, communists, and Islamists—has dominated Turkish political history”.³ Emcioğlu explains that this constant political clashing and power struggle is a fertile ground for journalists and novelists like Orhan Pamuk. Indeed, through a vigorous complication of setting and characterization Pamuk’s novel, *Snow*, explores the fault lines of Turkish identity, the too-often violent interplay between democracy, secularism, and political Islam, as well as the inevitable failure and melancholy of most characters living in this context. In an interview the author explains that the role of fiction is to allow readers to understand the ideas that govern their world, to give them access to the truths that are veiled by families, schools, and society. He asserts that, “it is the art of the novel that allows us to ask who we really are”.⁴

The plot of *Snow* commences when the main character Ka, a journalist who has been in political exile in Frankfurt for twelve

² Udo Steinbach, “State and Religion in Turkey,” in *State and Religion: Comparing Cases of Changing Relations* (Beirut: Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2011), 49.

³ Fikret Erkut Emcioğlu, “Turkey in Books,” *The Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. XIV, No. 2, Spring 2007, accessed 22 Apr 2012, 51-55, <http://www.meforum.org/1674/turkey-in-books>

⁴ Orhan Pamuk, “In Kars and Frankfurt,” in *Other Colors: Essay and a Story* (New York: Vintage International, 2007), 232.

years, returns to Turkey to attend his mother's funeral. He is quickly drawn to the peripheral city of Kars. Overtly, he is following the story of "the Suicide girls", girls who are believed to have committed suicide in response to the state's ban on wearing headscarves in schools. Covertly, readers learn that he is in Kars to meet Ipek, an old romantic interest who Ka learns is recently divorced. As soon as the character arrives, a snowstorm envelops the city and isolates it from the outside world for a period of approximately three days. The plot then revolves around a series of encounters between the main character and the various representatives of the government, press, religious and political institutions, a presumed terrorist called Blue as well as two students from the religious high school: Necip and Fazil. Interwoven within these encounters is a doomed love story between Ka and Ipek. The novel takes on an interesting twist when a dramatic performance by a passé actor Sunay Zaim and his wife turns into a staged coup meant to restrain the local Islamic radicals. After the violence of the coup subsides, and in a farcical scene, Ka convinces representatives from the various factions opposed to the coup, including Islamists, leftists, and Kurds, to produce a coherent statement to the European press denouncing the action. He is then taken in by the police and beaten and this is where he learns that Blue and Ipek were lovers. While it is not clear in the novel, readers can deduce that Ka betrays Blue's

whereabouts, because Blue is later shot. And while Ka attempts to convince Ipek to accompany him back to Frankfurt, she declines to meet him at the station after news of Blue's murder and he is forced to return to Frankfurt alone. In the end readers learn that he spends his years in Frankfurt yearning for his lover and his missed chance at happiness. We also learn that a new group of Islamic militants formed by the followers of Blue, and vowing to take revenge for the death of their admired leader, assassinate Ka.

Pamuk's novel overtly deals with issues of political violence in the form of suicide, political assassination and coup d'état. Covertly, the complex setting as well as parallel characterizations contextualise this violence by highlighting the socio-political struggles of modern Turkey in which East and West as well as "din-u devlet" (religion and state) are often violently juxtaposed against each other. To highlight some of the complexities of Turkish identity Pamuk utilizes the setting of the peripheral city of Kars. Explicitly, the title itself *Snow* translates as Kar in Turkish. More implicitly, Ka, the character is within Kars and isolated by Kar. This word play in the Turkish original materializes the sensation that the character is being enveloped within the town, and that the town is enveloped within the snow. Linguistically these three aspects share the same root KA (the protagonist/the ego) and one fits within the other somewhat like a Russian doll or what is also

known as Matryoshka.⁵ This linguistic similarity may suggest a more literal parallel between the internal conflicts of the main character and the external conflicts of the city of Kars itself, and could further suggest that these external conflicts within Kars point to the situation of Turkey as a whole. Pamuk himself points out the inevitability of seeing a parallel between the conditions of the city and those of Turkey. In “From the Snow in Kars Notebook” he clarifies that “the political disasters in the novel—as well as the poverty and other evils—these are things that have afflicted all of Turkey” (274).

Another significant aspect about the setting is that it is encapsulated like a snow globe.⁶ And what is interesting about a snow globe is that it is a clearly visualized object, encapsulated yet exposed. In a sense Pamuk opens the novel to the readers and they are allowed to view the action within like spectators of the beauty of a snow globe. Pamuk actually explains the concern with how one is perceived by the outside world as peculiar to Turkish culture

⁵ The Matryoshka Principle denotes a relationship of a similar object-within-similar object phenomenon that can be applied to the interpretation of the relationship between these three aspects. While one cannot be sure if this is intentional on the part of Pamuk, it does perhaps point to the strong Russian influence on the stylistic and thematic content of the novel as will be discussed in the next section.

⁶ Orhan Pamuk, *Layers of Politics, Humanity in Pamuk's Snow*, Interview with Steve Inskeep, National Public Radio, October 26, 2004, accessed 4 Apr 2012, <http://www.npr.org/templates/player/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=4124293&m=4126683>

and resulting from Turkey's unique geography. In an essay titled "Where is Europe?" Pamuk explains that the private lives of those who live on the edge of Europe are marked with a sense of being an object of the European gaze. He demonstrates that those who live in Istanbul for example assert their European selves by claiming: " 'If a European saw this, what would he think?' This is both a fear and a desire. We are all afraid that when they see how we do not resemble them, they will castigate us".⁷ A discussion between Ka and the character of the Islamist Blue highlights this concern. Blue mentions that he had escaped to Germany after having been found guilty of promoting the establishment of a state based on religious principles under Article 163 of the penal code (75). He explains:

When I was in Germany... whenever I happened to be walking, there was always one German who stood out from the crowd as an object of fascination for me. The important thing was not what I thought of him, but what I thought *he* might be thinking about *me*. I'd try to see through his eyes and imagine what he might be thinking about my appearance, my clothes, the way I moved, my history, where I had just been and where I was going, who I was. It made me feel terrible but it became a habit. I grew used to feeling degraded and I came to understand how my brothers felt. Most of the time it's not the Europeans who belittle us. What happens when we look at them is that we belittle ourselves. (75)

This monologue suggests that the Turk, living on the periphery of Europe feels belittled and degraded because he/she perceives

⁷ Orhan Pamuk, "Where is Europe?," in *Other Colours: Essays and a Story* (New York: Vintage International, 2007), 191.

themselves as an *other*. The self or the model in the Turkish republic is European, and cultural differences such as religion, history, and the future alienate the individual from within. Samuel Huntington explains a possible historical basis for this phenomenon. He asserts that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk,

...had created a new Turkey out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, and had launched a massive effort both to westernize it and modernize it. In embarking on this course, and rejecting the Islamic past, Atatürk made Turkey a "torn country," a society which was Muslim in its religion, heritage, customs, and institutions but with a ruling elite determined to make it modern, Western, and at one with the West.⁸

This tear between the past and the present and between faith and modernity not only manifests itself on a personal level but also on a political one.

While the novel's setting presents some of intricacies of Turkish identity, characterisation highlights the interpersonal and violent collision between *din-u devlet* in the modern Turkish republic. Though it initially appears that the main characters have foils, a closer examination demonstrates many of the characters are actually intertwined and collide with one another and with the main character Ka. That includes Ipek's divorcee and political candidate for God's Party, Muhtar, as well as Ipek's lover, the political Islamist Blue. The initial collision can be examined in

⁸ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2003), 74.

relation to the first violent episode in the novel, the murder of the Director of the Education Institute. The episode also highlights a conflict between democracy and Islamic religious expression, specifically concerning women's veiling. In the early sections of the novel, one chapter is titled "Excuse Me, Sir. The First and Last Conversation between the Murderer and his Victim" (38). In this section the narrator explains that when the Director of the Education Institute was shot in the head and chest by an unnamed man for banning covered girls from entering into educational institutions he was wearing a tape recorder "secured by duct tape by the diligent agents of the Kars branch of MIT, the national intelligence agency" (38). The narrator was able to acquire a transcript of the final conversation, and Pamuk includes the dialogue in its entirety in the novel. The dialogue in general begins in a very polite and amicable tone. The unnamed man introduces himself and asks to sit down with the director to ask him some questions using words such as "Sir... I'm sorry, I hope I'm not taking too much of your time... Please... do you mind if I sit down" (38-39). He calls the director an "eminent, enlightened, educated man" and offers to kiss his hands. The unnamed man then gradually reveals that he is thirty-six years old and that he has come all the way from Dokat where he is in charge of the stoves at the Happy Friends teahouse. He also explains that he doesn't belong to any religious organizations and that he despises

'terrorism' and believes in the love of God and the free exchange of ideas. He explains:

Every once in a while I'll get upset about something I've heard, about an injustice done to a believer. And because I live in a democracy, because I happen to be a free man who can do as he pleases, I sometimes end up getting on a bus and travelling to the other end of Turkey to track down the perpetrator wherever he is and have it out with him, face to face.
(41)

Yet through a series of questions, and a gradual elevation of aggressiveness readers also learn that the unnamed perpetrator has a bad temper, had been previously jailed, and in fact belongs to the Freedom Fighters for Islamic Justice and that he was sent to execute their death verdict. The questions on the side of both the murderer and his victim point to the complexity associated with the concepts of secularism and democracy. These two concepts appear to be consistent, and both are associated with the West. However the dialogue points to a number of problems with these concepts in the Turkish case. In the dialogue the perpetrator questions:

'With all due respect, professor Nuri Yilmaz –if you fear God, if you believe that the Holy Koran is the Word of God, then let's hear your views on the beautiful 31st verse of the chapter entitled "Heavenly Light"' (40).

'How can you reconcile God's command with this decision to ban covered girls from the classroom?'
(40)

'Can a law imposed by the state cancel our God's law?' (40)

'Does the word "secular" mean "godless"?' (40)

'How does this all fit with what our constitution says about educational and religious freedom?' (41)

'Do we really want to push our covered girls to the margins of society by denying them the right to an education?' (42).

The director in his own turn asks "'Of course, the real question is how much suffering we've caused our womenfolk by turning headscarves into symbols—and using women as pawns in a political game'" (43).

In the dialogue the murderer points to the idea that a religious individual living in a secular state is forced by that state to denounce some of his/her religious beliefs. The case being made by the unnamed perpetrator –that wearing the hijab/veil is a religious duty –refers to the interpretation of Quranic verse 31 of the chapter entitled "Heavenly Light" which states: "And tell the believing women to lower their gazes and be modest, and to display of their adornments only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms."⁹ This verse has been cited by religious clerics as a prescription for Muslim women to veil their bodies and their hair, though this is hardly a unanimous or uncontested interpretation. The unnamed perpetrator however mentions this verse to point out that if the state is also a proclaimed democracy, thus allowing the freedom of religious practice, then the state's opposition to religious or even cultural rites is undemocratic. He suggests that if a democratic state,

⁹ Koran 24:31

especially one with a majority Muslim population bans education, thus marginalizing and alienating females wearing a headscarf, this is a case of state prejudice.

The issues that are brought forward in the dialogue between the perpetrator and the Director bring attention to the plight of veiled women in Turkey, and comment on the potential oppression associated with state-enforced secularism. Rachel Bailey Jones in the *Postcolonial Representations of Women* quotes Lebanese author Amin Maalouf who explains that for Turks, modernization has constantly meant abandoning a part of themselves. “Even though [this abandoning] has sometimes been embraced with enthusiasm, it has never been adopted without a certain bitterness, without a feeling of humiliation and defection”.¹⁰ Jones also points to the historic and post colonial roots of the issue of women’s veiling, when she references the paternalistic writing of Lord Cromer “...whose efforts to unveil the women of Egypt were part of a greater civilizing mission” (156). She explains that:

The persistently patriarchal power structures in Europe are using the veiling of women as general critique of Muslim “difference.” Response to this recent call is reminiscent of the anti-colonial nationalist movements that saw unveiling as a form of elite westernization and an assault on cultural practices. “Now, in the name of ‘purifying’ the Muslim nation from internal corruption, and in the name of

¹⁰ Rachel Baily Jones, *Postcolonial Representation of Women* (New York: Springer Science & Business Media, 2011), 72. Subsequent reference in text.

countering the oppression of Western imperialism, religious fundamentalists posit women as key players in their whole project". (157)

Jones's example demonstrates her contention that the symbolism of the veil is rooted in earlier modes of the colonial experience. Colonial powers sought to unveil women in an effort to "civilize" Islamic societies in the past and religious fundamentalism seeks to promote veiling as a reaction to perceived internal corruption and the oppression of Western imperialism.

In the novel, another violent response opposing forced un-veiling is emphasized in a discussion of the phenomenon of the 'Suicide girls'. When Ka visits the families of the Suicide girls, one individual story, that of Teslim, catches his attention:

When the authorities had outlawed the wearing of headscarves in educational institutions across the country, many women and girls refused to comply. The rebels at the Institution in Kars had been barred first from the classrooms, and then, following an edict from Ankara, from the entire institute... the real pressure had come from her school friends who were running the campaign against the banishment of covered women from the institute. Certainly, it was they who taught her to think of the headscarf as a symbol of 'political Islam'. So despite her parents' expressed wish that she remove her headscarf, the girl refused, thus ensuring that she would frequently be removed by the police from the halls of the institute. When she saw some of her friends giving up and uncovering their heads, and others forgoing their headscarves to wear wigs instead, the girl began to tell her father that life had no meaning and that she no longer wanted to live... When she finished her oblations, she knelt down on her prayer

rug, lost herself for some time in thought and prayer,
then tied her headscarf to the lamp hook, from which
she hanged herself. (16-17)

Combining Teslim's experience with the Director's earlier question concerning the veil suggests that the headscarf is a political symbol in a political game with violent repercussions. The author might be referring to either a game between the secular state system and political Islam, or to the more generic game between East and West. In either case, the veil becomes a symbol of resistance, resistance to the feelings of shame and self hate imposed on a population looking at an 'other' to evaluate oneself. Colleen Clements explains that the story of Teslime demonstrates "the anxiety that nations have over their crumbling borders, and their tendency to inscribe this anxiety upon women's bodies".¹¹ The veil is perceived as an affirmation of the Muslim and Middle Eastern identity of Turkey –of its 'otherness'—and forcibly removing the veil in an attempt to Westernize and secularize the state is perceived as a rejection of the specific culture of a nation. Clements adds that:

In a public space in *Snow's* Turkey, women can no longer choose the way in which they cover their bodies, which are now public battlegrounds for the state's fight against the Islamists. In an effort to quell a desire for a theocratic state, the state forces the girls away from their best opportunity to fight fundamentalism: in education. (146)

¹¹ Colleen Ann Lutz Clemens, "'Suicide Girls': Orhan Pamuk's *Snow* and the Politics of Resistance in Contemporary Turkey," *Feminist Formations* Vol. 23, No. 1 (2011): 140 <<https://muse.jhu.edu/>>. Subsequent reference in text.

The novel, in the two sections dealing with the Suicide girls and the murder of the Director of the Education Institute, exemplifies the Turkish conundrum of conceding between a secular democratic republic and a growing conservative and politically Islamic population. The novel suggests that these two facets of the Turkish identity collide violently, whether through assassination and suicide on the side of the opposition, or through repression and alienation on the side of the state.

These violent episodes involve and ensnare many of the main characters like Ka, Muhtar, and Blue and emphasise the congruence between them. And while the clearly similar aspect between the three characters is that they are lovers of the same woman, a closer look demonstrates that although each character represents what appears to be contrary Turkish political and social factions their political experiences and fates are analogous. A parallel between Muhtar and Ka juxtaposes poetry, atheism, and political Islam and emphasizes a duality within the Turkish identity as well as the conflict between the secular state and its religious opposition. Muhtar is a poet in his own right interested in folklore and the beauties of the homeland (54). After the military took over, presumably in the 1970s or 1980s coup, he was imprisoned and disillusioned. He explains: “and, like everyone else, when I was released I drifted like an idiot. The people I had once

tried to imitate had changed; those whose approval I had once sought had disappeared; and none of my dreams had come true, not in poetry or life" (54). He returned to Kars to take over his father's shop, married the beautiful Ipek, and lost himself to drinking. He explains to Ka that in remaining childless God had denied him a child who might do all the things he wanted to do, who might "release [him] from [his] misery by becoming the Westernized, modern and self-possessed individual [he] had always dreamed of becoming" (55). In his meeting with Ka, readers learn through Ka's cognitions that they both share a similar life experience. The narrator explains that in their meeting Ka imagines what they would say to each other:

'Now that we've both been forced into exile, without having managed to achieve much, or succeed at anything, or even find happiness, we can at least agree that life's been hard! It wasn't enough to be a poet... That's why politics still casts a shadow over our lives.' But, even having said this, neither would find it in him to add what he could not admit even to himself: 'It's because we failed to find happiness in poetry that we have found ourselves hiding in the shadow of politics'. (53)

Readers learn through Serder Bey that now Muhtar is a member of the Prosperity Party, the party of God, and that he is running for mayor. Muhtar is an atheist who has turned to the religious right. He comments about the appeal of his choice, claiming: "The religious right, this country's Muslim conservatives... After my years as a leftist atheist, these people come as such a relief... Unlike Westernized Turks, they don't instinctively despise the common

folks. They're compassionate and wounded themselves'" (62). This quote juxtaposes the religious right to Westernized, leftist or atheist, Turks, and describes the appealing aspect of the former as a sense of compassion. Muhtar explains that on one night and in a drunken stupor he encountered an open door with light pouring through it, he followed the people coming in and was accepted into the group and taken into the secret lodge of His Excellency Saadettin Efendi, the Kurdish sheik. And this marks his return to Islam. He explains however that his failure as a poet, and the unhappiness that this caused, was the only reason he resorted to joining a party and began practicing politics (58). Ka has a clearly parallel experience in the novel where readers learn that after polishing off a double raki he too heads to the Sheik's lodge. Ironically upon climbing the staircase he remembers that he was still carrying 'Staircase', Muhtar's poem, in his jacket pocket (96). With the Sheik, Ka likewise has a spiritual experience. He discusses the concept of God, and coins the duality in his psyche regarding the identification of God. Ka comments:

'I've always wanted my country to prosper, to modernize... I've wanted freedom for its peoples...But it seemed to me that our religion was always against this... I grew up... among society people. I wanted to be like the Europeans. Because I couldn't see how I could reconcile my becoming a European with a God that required women to wrap themselves up in scarves, I kept religion out of my life'. (98)

Ka explains that he could not reconcile his European self with the provincial reactionaries and the uneducated, and that at the heart of the matter was an issue of pride (99). This pride is associated with Ka's identification of himself as European and viewing the Sheik's version of God as uneducated, provincial, and thus inferior. Ka's association of atheism with Westernization and an ensuing sense of pride can be compared to Muhtar's earlier association of the religious right with a sense of compassion. Ka claims to the Sheik: "I want to believe in the God you believe in and be like you, but, because there's a Westerner inside me, my mind is confused' " (100).

The political game between the secular government and the religious opposition party is implied through Muhtar's response to the death of the director of the Education Institute. Upon meeting Ka and hearing about the murder, Muhtar asks: "have you called the police?" (51). When Ka affirms that he did not and that he had come to Muhtar first thing after witnessing the murder, Muhtar is alarmed, and he explains:

There are only five days until the election, and everyone knows we're going to win, so the state is knitting a sock to pull over our heads. It's prepared to say anything to bring us down... All across Turkey our support of the covered girls is the key expression of our political vision. Now someone's tried to assassinate the wretch who refused to let those girls past the entrance of the Education Institute; and now a man who was at the scene of the crime comes straight to our party headquarters. (52)

This admission highlights first the popularity of the religious right as a viable political option in Turkey. In fact, Serder Bey explains in an earlier section that:

...these Islamists... they go from door to door in groups, paying house visits: they give women pots and pans, and those machines that squeeze oranges, and boxes of soaps, cracked wheat and detergent. They concentrate on the poor neighbourhoods; they ingratiate themselves with the women... they win the trust of the angry and humiliated unemployed... we're not just talking about the lowest of the low. Even people with jobs—even tradesmen—respect them, because these Islamists are more hardworking, more honest, more modest than anyone else. (26)

In fact Serder Bey goes on further to explain that the mayor of Kars who was also recently assassinated was hated, because he took bribes and lacked direction. He adds that the republican parties on both the right and the left, divided as they were by blood feuds and ethnic issues, had failed to come up with viable candidates to run for mayor. He asserts that the next mayor will be Muhtar Bey, running for God's party (26). The discussion between Ka and Serder Bey clarifies the appeal of the religious Right in a vacuum of alternatives and the abundance of governing representatives who are corrupt and lacking direction. Muhtar's earlier concerns also point to government ploys to sabotage opposition parties, especially if they are religious. In this case a murder can relegate the religious party to nothing more than a group of

fundamentalists and fanatics, turning politics to terrorism and undermining political Islam as a viable option.

This aspect of politicising Islam is further discussed in the sections dealing with the character of Blue, and not coincidentally Blue also serves as a parallel to Ka and Muhtar. In the early part of the novel the narrator gives his readers some biographical information about Ka. He claims: “Although he’d spent twelve years in political exile in Germany, our traveller had never been much of an activist” (4). In fact in a conversation with Ipek, Ka explains that in the seventies small political newspapers enjoyed considerable freedoms, much more than the penal code allowed:

Anyone tried and found guilty of ‘insulting the state’ tended to feel proud of it... but after the military coup of 1980, the authorities slowly got around to tracking down everyone who’d earlier evaded prison... It was in this period that Ka, having been tried for a hastily written political article he had not even written, fled to Germany. (33)

Likewise Blue gained his notoriety and fled to Germany based on a murder that he probably did not commit. Before Ka’s meeting with Blue, he is escorted by a young boy named Necip, who asks what Ka has heard about Blue. Ka responds: “I read in the Turkish newspaper that he was a militant political Islamist” (69). Necip responds: ““Political Islamist” is just a name that Westerns and secularists give us Muslims who are ready to fight for our religion...

You're a secularist, but please don't let yourself fall for the lies about him in the press. He hasn't killed anyone'" (69). In this section Necip underlines that the title of political Islamist is derogatory and points to the utilization of violence for political ends. The narrator clarifies that when a provocative TV host made an inappropriate comment about the Prophet Mohammed on his live TV show, Blue had sent a letter to all Istanbul papers threatening to kill the host if he did not make a formal apology on his next show. The narrator explains that the press receives threats of this nature all the time but that:

The television station had such a commitment to its provocative secularist line—and to showing just how rabid these political Islamists could be—that the managers invited Blue to appear on the show... he was such a hit as the 'wild-eyed, scimitar-wielding Islamist' that he was invited to repeat his performance on other channels (71).

What could have probably been an unnoticed letter became a public concern exposed and exploited by the media. In the narrative readers learn that this TV host is later strangled in his hotel room and that Blue had an alibi and was therefore not the perpetrator of the murder; his media appearance actually served as a catalyst for others. The narrator adds that:

Blue had an alibi—he'd been attending a conference in Manisa in support of the headscarf girls—but he stayed in hiding to avoid the press, which by now had made sure that the whole country knew about the accident and Blue's part in it. Some of the Islamist press were as critical as the secularist. They accused Blue of 'bloodying the hands' of political Islam, of allowing himself to become the plaything of the

secularist press, of enjoying his media fame in a manner unbefitting a Muslim, of being a spy of the CIA. (72)

Both the secularists and the Islamists attack blue. He is accused of being a spy for the CIA in the sense that he has played the role of the violent Islamist, thus giving the state as well as the West the excuse for their discrimination against political Islam. Blue on the other hand, accuses the state of orchestrating this entire plot. He explains to Ka, concerning the shooting of the director of the Education Institute:

‘A few hours ago, you witnessed the shooting of the director of the Education Institute. This was a direct result of the anger of our believers over the cruelty that the state had visited on our covered girls. But, of course, the whole thing is a state plot. First they used this poor director to enforce their cruel measures; then they incited some madman to try to kill him so they could pin the blame on the Muslims.’(78)

This statement points to the mistrust between the Islamists and the State. In fact, the novel’s characters routinely point to a lack of clarity behind most political actions taking place, which can either be interpreted as conspiracies or as viable acts of free will. Blue points to a phenomenon where states are accused of sponsoring acts of violence and utilizing them as pretexts for attacking the opposition.

In a much later section towards the end of the novel Blue is arrested and decides to write down a confession for his followers

so they may know some truths about him. This confession sheds light on Blue's intellectual journey and positions it in relation to Turkish socio-political changes. He claims:

I would like to make clear that I have no regrets about anything I have done for political reasons at any time in the past... During my childhood and early youth, my father maintained secret links with a Cerrahi lodge and I grow up inside his humble, silent world. In my youth I rebelled against him by becoming a godless leftist, and when I was at university I tagged along with the other young militants... For years no one noticed me. I was an electronic engineer. Because of the hatred I felt for the West, I admired the revolution in Iran. I returned to Islam... I took inspiration from Franz Fanon's work on violence, from the pilgrimages Seyyid Kutub has made in protest against oppression... I have never killed anyone... I leave behind my poems as my testament, and I would like them to be published (328-329)

In this section Blue mentions his father's secret links with the Cerrahi (sufi) order. Umat Azak explains that to keep control of all religious activity in 1925 and with the Law No. 677 the Kemalist single-party regime outlawed all Sufi orders (*tarikats*) and dissolved and closed all local and central dervish lodges. Azak explains that, "this law prohibited the use of mystical names, titles and costumes pertaining to these titles, impounded the assets of certain orders, banned their ceremonies and meetings, and provided sentences for those who tried to re-establish them"¹².

Azak argues that cultural reforms, in the shape of interventions in

¹² Umat Azak, *Islam and Secularism in Turkey: Kemalism, Religion and the Nation State* (London: I.B Tuaris, 2010), 10. Subsequent reference in text.

the lives of everyday people whether through education, law, or even dress code, in this period were intended to make the new Turkish nation a part of the civilized Western world and that,

The Kemalist elite internalized Eurocentric Orientalist discourse by approaching its basic assumption, especially its acceptance of a hierarchical dichotomy between the East and the West and the normative and teleological view of history, in which Western modernity represented the latest and superior stage. While traditional culture was pushed back in time and degraded as the cause of failure vis-à-vis the Western powers, Western civilization was accepted as a “telos”, a stage which the Turkish nation had to reach. (11)

In its efforts to modernize, the Kemalist project rejected and banned popular religion in the form of mystical Sufism. This ban no doubt created a vacuum that would later be filled with other, more literal, religious practices such as those propagated by Hassan El Banna and Sayyid Kuttub.

In a phase of rebellion against his father, Blue turns to leftist atheism and associates this atheism with militancy. He mentions being influenced by Franz Fanon. Fanon's ideas in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) concern the effects of colonization and can be read in relation to the Turkish modernization project. In Fanon's conclusion he claims:

We today can do everything, so long as we do not imitate Europe, so long as we are not obsessed by the desire to catch up with Europe... When I search for Man in the technique and the style of Europe, I see

only a succession of negations of man, and an avalanche of murders.¹³

The state and the elite's staunch adoption of Eurocentric Orientalist discourse in the post-colonial climate of the 1960s and 1970s, no doubt resulted in the birth of antagonistic resistance against it. In the case of Blue, this antagonism led him to Political Islam and the ideas of Sayyid Kuttub. Kuttub was an Egyptian author, poet, Islamic theorist and prominent member of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1960s and the perceived founding father of Muslim radicalism.¹⁴ Kuttub gave Islamic religious legitimacy to the duty of maintaining violent Jihad against the colonial oppressor as well as Arab secular regimes, which were perceived by him as heretics: "[He] preached also that Muslim states should be ruled by the Koran, and that all other forms of rule were a negation of the Koran and a blasphemous challenge to it".¹⁵ Sami Zubaida explains that religious reformists, like Kuttub, were also against the perceived corruption and superstition of popular Islamic mysticism (Sufism). These reformists propagated a religion that was rational, based on scriptures and a modern interpretation and formulation of the sources of law. In that aspect the reformists

¹³ Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 312.

¹⁴ Seyyid Kutub, *Social Justice and Islam* (Cairo: Maktabat Misr, 1953).

¹⁵ "Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya (The Islamic Group, IG)," *The Islamic Institute for Counter-Terrorism*, accessed 15 Jun, 2014, <http://212.150.54.123/organizations/orgdet.cfm?orgid=12>

coincided on the one side with the secular nationalists, including Ataturk, and on the other with the radical fundamentalists and Salafists.¹⁶ “They all shared an antagonism to the common people and their religion in the name of progress and religious or national purity/authenticity and righteousness” (409). One of the major running motifs throughout the novel is that things that appear opposing end up being revealed as the same. At the end readers learn that Blue, like Ka and Muhtar, is also a poet and a lover of Ipek who oscillates between the left and the right in his search for identification and association. The act of violence, the shooting of the Director of the Education Institute, seems to ensnare these three characters that either witness it or are charged for it. The characters that overtly represent various offshoots of Turkish politics, covertly share the same life story. They are all facets of the same man so to speak, of the potential of every Turkish man who is a product of the 1970s and 1980s political milieu. More importantly, they cannot avoid being involved in the political context and its ensuing violence, and it is this that the novel describes as the ‘terrorizing’ fate of every man, or symbolically as the fate of the falling snowflake.

¹⁶ Salafism refers to the adherence to a literal, strict and puritanical interpretation of Islam and has been linked closely with Wahabism.

In a hyperbolic fusion of art and politics, the collective fate of the characters and the city itself culminates in a communal experience of a theatrical performance turned military coup. In fact the novel's climax revolves around theatrical performances orchestrated by a passé actor Sunay Zaim and his troop that is transformed into a republican coup supported by the army, with the aim of restraining the advances of the political Islamists and Kurdish separatists. Philip Giraldi explains that there are three distinct cultures in Turkey that have been cobbled together in a less than harmonious whole:

There is Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's Turkey, consisting of a traditionally Western-looking, educated elite that is both fiercely secular and increasingly xenophobic and nationalistic. This elite, which includes the senior ranks of the army, is concentrated in Istanbul and Ankara...

A second Turkey is the predominantly rural Anatolian heartland, the Turkey of villages and simple values... the Anatolian Turk constitutes the majority of the country's population. He is traditionally religious, socially conservative, and increasingly assertive in his desire that Islam should play a greater and more visible role in Turkish life...

The third Turkey is the land of the Kurds, possibly one-fifth of the overall Turkish population and concentrated in the poor and backward southeastern corner of the country bordering Iraq, Syria, and Iran. Ethnic Kurds dominate both sides of the border in the region, totaling more than 30 million.¹⁷

The section of the novel dealing with the military coup positions the first group violently against the two latter ones. The first play performed by

¹⁷ Philip Giraldi, "Turkey and the Threat of Kurdish Nationalism", *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2003), 34-35.

Sunay Zaim is an updated version of a mid-thirties play *My Fatherland or My Headscarf*. In this performance a traditional veiled village woman played by Zaim's wife Funda Ester removes her headscarf and declares her independence with the help of soldiers and against the will of religious zealots (150). The theatre performance is broadcast live locally, and the audience includes most segments of Kars society. Dignitaries and top government officials, republicans and secularists are seated in the front seats while the back includes poor Kurdish students and students from the religious high school. Other segments of Kars society like teachers, vendors, dealers, children and the elderly also fill the hall. In the novel, the entire audience has a collective experience of terror in response to the play. The narrator explains that even the Westernized secularists sitting in the front seats could not imagine the state forcing women to remove their veils as they did in the thirties (151). On the other hand, the religious high school boys were not just bothered by the play's affront to covered women or the caricature representation of Islamists as ugly and dirty fanatics, "they also suspected the whole thing had been staged to provoke them" (156).

The first performance ends when Sunay Zaim appears on stage wearing an army uniform from the thirties and proclaims:

'Oh, you honorable and beloved citizens of Turkey... you've embarked on the road to enlightenment and no one can turn you back from this great and noble journey. Do not fear. The reactionaries who want to turn back time, those vile beasts with their

cobwebbed minds, they will never be allowed to crawl out of their hole. Those who seek to meddle with the republic, with freedom, with enlightenment will see their hands crushed'. (158)

The clear paradox in Zaim's statement concerns the silencing of the voices of political Islam for the sake of maintaining freedom. The other feature that seems to justify this silencing is a suggestion that these voices are not humane, therefore their restraint does not alter Turkish notions of freedom. Expressions such as 'vile beasts', 'cob-webbed minds', and 'crawl out of their holes' emphasize an aspect of animalization that seems to accompany a fanatical republican/nationalist view. Zaim's speech actually tempts readers to question the fault lines between forced secularization and democracy. In *Orhan Pamuk, Secularism and Blasphemy* author Erdağ Göknar explains that the coup can actually be interpreted as a symptom of the paranoid mode of thinking that reads Islamic and Kurdish political representation as a threat to the secular state.¹⁸

After Zaim's monologue a detachment of soldiers appears on either side of the stage and enters the main doors marching down the aisles. The soldiers cock their rifles and take aim straight at the audience and open fire. The audience is stunned and terrified to realize that the rifles are loaded with live ammunition (159). The

¹⁸ Erdağ Göknar, *Orhan Pamuk, Secularism and Blasphemy* (London: Routledge, 2013), 318.

theatrical performance mutates into a violent coup that is acted out on a literal stage and witnessed live. Sunay Zaim in a later discussion with Ka explains what could be the author's rationale behind a theatrical coup, explaining that " 'It was Hegel who first noticed that history and theatre are made of the same materials... Remember that, just as in theatre, history chooses those who play the leading roles. And just as the actors put their courage to the test on the stage, so, too, do the chosen few on the stage of history' " (202). In the sections of the theatrical coup, Pamuk manages to merge farce and violence in what appears to be a completely unbelievable scenario. But what some readers of his novel would know is that the violence of the theatrical performance is no more farcical than real life events such as the Moscow theatre hostage crisis in October 2002, for example, which happened shortly after the novel was published.¹⁹ In modern Turkey the army actually staged three coups since 1960 in its efforts to "save the state".²⁰ George S. Harris explains that the first coup grew out of tensions engendered by a widespread belief that "the Democrat Party government of Adnan Menderes and Celal Bayar was about to return to one-party rule by abolishing Ataturk's party" (203). This

¹⁹ "Moscow Theater Siege: Questions Remain Unanswered," *BBC News*, 24 October 2012, accessed 14 June 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20067384>.

²⁰ George S. Harris, "Military Coups and Turkish Democracy, 1960–1980," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 12, issue 2 (2011): 203, doi: 10.1080/14683849.2011.573181. Subsequent reference in text.

coup resulted in the hanging of the country's first freely elected Prime Minister Menderes. In 1980 Turkish generals cemented their power after another coup by pushing through an authoritarian constitution, and again in 1997, the generals toppled the country's first Islamist-led government, on the grounds that it was seeking to introduce Sharia law. In fact the Turkish pattern of civil-military relations is quite unique and reflects the centuries-long historical experience of the Ottoman Empire, the War of Independence, the Cold War, as well as the immense modernization project which was entrusted to the Turkish army itself.²¹ Ersel Aydinli explains that,

The Turkish army was never the army of a single party, and it was never the tool of radical politicians. It was also never truly a predatory army that sought long-term power, having always returned power promptly to the civilians after various military interventions. On the other hand, it was never convinced that the level of democracy in Turkey and the quality of civilian politics was good enough to become completely subordinate to them. (584)

Harris clarifies that while the military establishment for many years attained the allegiance of the populace at large, successive military interventions over the years since the 1960s weakened this general acceptance. Today differing views on the military's role have become part of the sharp left-right cleavage in Turkish politics (203). The character of Sunay Zaim demonstrates some of these

²¹ Ersel Aydinli, "A Paradigmatic Shift for the Turkish Generals and an End to the Coup Era in Turkey," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (2009): 584, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20622955>

extreme right views, while the violence that Pamuk highlights in the novel suggests the author's critique of military intervention into the political domain.

In this context the character of Ka, the outsider and the poet, finds himself positioned at the fault lines. Sunay Zaim in fact describes the character of Ka as a man whose intellect belongs to Europe, whose heart belongs to the religious high-school militants and whose head is all mixed up (210). As such, in the aftermath of the violent performance Ka finds himself in a position of state agent/mediator. Ka is taken to the military headquarters to meet Zaim. In their discussion Zaim presents Ka with his vision of the Turkish political struggle, by focusing on aspects of multiple worlds that exist within Turkey. Zaim's vision juxtaposes Europe and Islam by virtue of overgeneralizing: he claims to Ka:

'Like you... I read everything Sartre and Zola had ever written, and believed that our future lay with Europe. To see that whole world destroyed, to see my sister forced to wear a headscarf, to see poems banned for being anti-religious, as we've seen in Iran—this is one spectacle I don't think you would be prepared to take lying down. Because you're from my world, and there's no one else in Kars who reads the poetry of T.S. Eliot. (205-206)

In this case, Zaim distinguishes between alternate worlds that exist in Turkey, one in which European culture and artistic creation is hailed and another which forces headscarves and denounces poetry. This juxtaposition is political rather than cultural and

focuses on a radical Westernization versus a radical Islam-ization of Turkey. Pamuk alludes to the folly of such a radical juxtaposition when Ka claims that, “Muhtar, the candidate for the Prosperity Party, has...a great interest in poetry” (206). In other words, this polarization does not necessarily apply. To which Zaim responds: “we don’t even have to keep him locked up anymore...He’s signed a statement declaring his withdrawal from the race” (206). Zaim clarifies that Ka’s role in the coup is to bait Blue and assist in his capture. Zaim claims:

[Blue’s] somewhere in the city, and he will definitely want to see you again. It could be difficult for you to tip us off, I suggest that we plant one or two microphones on you and perhaps a transmitter in your coat—you’d have the same protection as the late Director of the Education Institute had so you’d have little to worry for your safety.’(210)

The irony here of course is that the Director is shot by the religious zealot, and had no protection at all. This statement suggests that MIT was in fact responsible for the murder in the sense that they could have prevented it, but chose not to.

In the final sections of the novel Ka meets again with Blue, and their discussion reinforces two of the main themes of the novel. To begin with Blue questions Ka about his affiliation to Western newspapers, and in response Ka lies about his affiliation to a German paper the *Frankfurter Rundschau*. Blue asks to make a

statement that would be printed in the paper. The narrator mentions that:

Blue said that at least eighty people had been killed so far (the actual death toll, including those shot in the theatre, was seventeen). Numerous schools and houses had been raided and tanks had destroyed nine shanties (the real figure was four). After claiming that a number of students had died under torture, Blue alluded to a number of street skirmishes that Ka has not heard anyone else mention. Glossing rather quickly over the suffering of the Kurds, he slightly exaggerated those visited on the Islamists. He said that the state had arranged for the mayor and the director of the Education Institute to be assassinated to provide a pretext for the coup. And the coup itself was designed to prevent the Islamists winning the election. The banning of all political parties and associations proved his point, he said. (232)

This statement points to the prevalence of misinformation and propaganda in dealing with acts of political violence. While there might be some truth to Blue's assertions, the narrator's inserted remarks highlight that these assertions are exaggerated. Blue exaggerates the violence visited on the Islamists and in doing so loses credibility with Ka and with readers as well. Blue also demonstrates a major interest in presenting these numbers to the West. He actually questions:

'Will the West, which takes its greatest invention, democracy, more seriously than the word of God, come out against this coup that has brought an end to democracy in Kars? ... Or are we to conclude that democracy, freedom and human rights don't matter, that all the West wants is for the rest of the world to imitate it like monkeys? Can the West endure democracy achieved by enemies who in no way resemble them?' (233)

Interest in a Western acceptance of the Islamist narrative is a major concern for Blue. In fact, these statements by Blue and earlier statements by Zaim point to a Turkish predicament in which political options are not a natural product of the socio-cultural specificities of Turkey and are in fact reactionary to Western political structures. The Turkish narrative, whether republican or Islamist, longs to be corroborated and embraced by a Western audience. In this sense, Turkish Islamists do not necessarily reject the West as a basis for their civilizational identity and still look “outside” to validate their position. David N. Court explains that for a country to successfully redefine its “civilizational identity”, it must meet three criteria²²:

First, the political and economic elite must *want* the shift; second, the public must be willing “to acquiesce” to such a redefinition; and third, the dominant elements in the “host civilization” (in this case, the West—or more specifically Europe—have to be willing to embrace the “convert”; *The Clash* 139).

These criteria, when read against the novel, clarify the possible tear in Turkish identity. While the governing elite has been striving to redefine Turkish civilizational identity since the days of the early republic, the public is still not ready to concede to such a

²² David N. Coury, “Torn Country”: Turkey and the West in Orhan Pamuk’s *Snow*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 50, Issue 4 (Summer 2009), 344, doi: 10.3200/ CRIT.50.4.340-349

redefinition. Utilizing violence and the nondemocratic suppression of Islam seems to only further this tear.

Conclusion

In *Snow* the main term that is used to denote a political opposition is “Islamists” belonging to “the religious right”. The religious right here suggests a political faction that advocates social and political conservatism based on the principles of the Islamic religion, which has emerged and gained popularity in retaliation to strict Turkish republicanism. The character of Muhtar Bey is described and he describes himself as belonging to “the religious right, a member of the Prosperity Party: the party of God”. Serder Bey describes Muhtar Bey and his party under a broader umbrella term of “Islamists”. This term is used politically by Serder Bey to refer to viable and popular political opposition to “republican parties both on the left and the right”.

On the other hand the character of Blue is described in newspapers as a “militant political Islamist”. The addition of the term militant suggests violence and the fact that Blue is wanted by the authorities and is in hiding. In the discussion between Ka and Necip, the religious high school student denies that Blue had committed any violence. Blue in a later section writes his will and

attests to the fact that he has never killed anyone. This suggests that Blue is also an Islamist but not necessarily a militant Islamist. The nationalists perceive both Muhtar and Blue as threats to the state based on their political ideology. Both characters are literally cut down by the state at the end of the novel.

There is one section where the term terrorism is used. This section deals with the murder of the Director of the Education Institute. Pamuk refers to the characters in this episode as murderer and victim. He then moves on to describe the background of the murderer who initially claims that he hates “terrorism”, but the narrator Orhan reveals that he is a member of the Freedom Fighters for Islamic Justice and had come to Kars to execute their death verdict. The author who describes the entire episode as an act of murder undermines the characters’ reference to the term terrorism by demonstrating that the taking of lives whether for religious or political ideology at the end is an act of murder. The term terrorism that is used by the murderer here loses significance and meaning. In another section concerning the shooting in the theatre, the narrator Orhan explains that, “the audience is stunned and terrified to learn that the rifles are loaded with live ammunition” (159). The author uses these terms ‘terrified’ and ‘terrorism’ to describe violence whether perpetrated by a fanatic zealot or by the state. Pamuk seems to undermine the very

concept of violence by describing its absurdity, whether in the murder of the Director of the Education scene or in the theatrical coup scene, as well as highlighting the seemingly more important issue of the manipulation of violence by all players in the Turkish political game. In the novel the political struggle is between the Islamists and the republicans and violence is utilized by both, and suspected of both sides interchangeably.

In the novel players who are vying to promote their own vision of Turkish civilizational identity commit political violence. Both the Republicans and the Islamists seem to be yanking the nation towards opposing ends. However, Pamuk is suggesting that these two ends are not as different as they appear. In fact through the utilization of violence they coincide and even exist in a mutually beneficial relationship. The Islamists utilize the violence of the Republican state and its corruption to gain popularity with the masses and win elections, while the state focuses on the violence of the Islamists and even the perceived fear of this violence to maintain its hold over the state. The characters whether male or female in this context represent the battleground, the body, on which this conflict is acted out and is thus figuratively ripped apart in the struggle.

CHAPTER IV

Almost Dead

Almost Dead (2006) by Israeli writer and translator, Assaf Gavron, is a black comedy dealing with the absurdities of living in Israel/Palestine during the Second Intifada (uprising). Originally published under the title *Tanin Pigua* (Croc Attack) in Israel it was translated into English by Gavron himself and James Lever in 2010. The novel controversially presents the perspectives of both an Israeli and a Palestinian, both proportionately cohabiting the space of the text in alternating chapter-by-chapter first person narrations. The Israeli character Eitan "The Croc" Enoch narrates his experience in fast-paced linear narrative form as he survives four terrorist attacks and becomes an Israeli hero and a symbol of survival, while the character Fahmi, a Palestinian from the Al-Amari refugee camp, narrates in lyrical flashback his experience of the occupation and his involvement in these same attacks. At the end of the novel readers actually learn that Fahmi has been narrating from the depth of a coma after he is injured in an attempt to assassinate Croc.¹ In addition to the feat of presenting both

¹ This ending alters the preconceived significance of the English title of the novel when the readers realize that the character that is *Almost Dead* is not necessarily Croc but could also refer to Fahmi, who actually dies at the end of the novel, and narrates entirely from a state of near-death. In this case, the title character could be perceived as either of these two

perspectives equally in one novel, the characters' distinctive tones (sarcastic and colloquial in the Croc sections, candid and lyrical in the Fahmi sections) attempt to capture the nature of the space and experience of *being* Israeli and *being* Palestinian during the Second Intifada. And while various parallels between the characters' present and familial experiences provide readers with a controversial perspective on terror and political violence within the context of state building, as the novel progresses elements of this violence, which initially seem uncanny, are gradually represented as grounded within very specific socio-political realities.

The context of the novel, the Second Intifada, or the Al-Aqsa Intifada as it is also known, refers to the period between 2000 and 2005, which saw a significant rise in the use of violence between Israelis and Palestinians. The death toll in this period according to B'TSELEM, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the West Bank, is estimated at over 3,000 Palestinians killed by security personnel or Israeli civilians, and about 400 Israeli civilians or Israeli security force personnel killed by Palestinians.²

characters or both simultaneously. This however is not the case for the Hebrew title *Tanin Pigua*, which refers particularly to the character of the Croc.

² "Statistics," *B'Tselem- The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories*, accessed 11 Mar 2013,

This period saw the execution of approximately 146 suicide attacks by Palestinians.³ It also prompted the then acting Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami to claim that: "Israel's disproportionate response to what had started as a popular uprising with young, unarmed men confronting Israeli soldiers armed with lethal weapons fuelled the Intifada beyond control and turned it into an all-out war".⁴ Within this milieu of political violence, the novel shows the separate lives that the two main characters lead, but also emphasizes how the characters' lives intertwine geographically on various occasions without their realization, and then gradually also physically as the novel culminates with their tragic collision. In terms of background experience, Gavron mentions in a blog for the Jewish Book Council that he was actually a soldier in Gaza during the First Intifada. He states that:

That period of a few months in 1988 was the first time I was exposed to Palestinian life. The first time I understood what 'occupation' means, how it works, and how life under it looks like. How young kids behave when they are given power over other people, and how those people react to them.⁵

http://old.btselem.org/statistics/english/Casualties.asp?sD=29&sM=09&sY=2000&eD=15&eM=1&eY=2005&filterby=event&oferet_stat=before

³ Yoram Schweitzer, "The Rise and Fall of Suicide Bombings in the Second Intifada", *Canada Free Press*, November 17, 2010, accessed March 11, 2013, <http://www.canadafreepress.com/index.php/article/30073>

⁴ Shlomo Ben-Ami, *Scars of War, Wounds of Peace* (London: Oxford University Press, 2006), 267. Ben-Ami remained Foreign Minister and Security Minister until March 2001. Ben-Ami refused to serve in the Sharon government and resigned from the Knesset in August 2002.

⁵ Assaf Gavron, "Almost Dead: Gaza, 1988/Tel Aviv & Jerusalem, 2002,"

And while he was never the victim of a terrorist attack, he believes that living in Tel Aviv during the events of the Second Intifada gave him the necessary insight into the mind frame of many Israelis at the time. He explains in his blog that, “[the] surreal and chaotic atmosphere, with suicide bombs going off on a daily basis in Israeli cities and people living in trauma and paranoia while trying to conduct their ‘normal’ daily life, almost called me to deal with it through writing”.

The novel begins with the character of Eitan “The Croc” Enoch getting on a No. 5 minibus on his way to work in Tel Aviv. Croc is confronted by an old lady who suspects that a dark man on the minibus is a terrorist, but Croc dismisses her fears as paranoia. Croc then encounters Giora Guetta, from Jerusalem, who asks that Croc send an unspecified message to his girlfriend Shuli in the case of an attack. After Croc exits the bus he learns that it has exploded in downtown Tel Aviv. Croc rushes to the scene and miraculously retrieves the Palm Pilot belonging to Guetta. Then readers are introduced to the second main character, Fahmi, who narrates the details of the attack on the No. 5. The character of a Jewish nurse Svetlana, who talks to him but does not seem to hear his responses,

often disrupts Fahmi's narration. Svetlana mentions Fahmi's family members and he begins to reminisce about his father, his sister, his brother Bilahl, and his love Rana. Readers are then brought back to Croc who explains that he also has American citizenship and that most of his family members are in Maryland, and he presents an interesting discussion about the Zionist dream and its reversal, especially after the ensuing violent attacks. Fahmi then narrates the story of his grandfather's expulsion from his village in Beit Machir in 1949, from where he moved to Al-Amari to become a refugee. Fahmi also tells of his mother's death, which he relates to an Israeli blockade of the village of Murair, where the family lived. Switching perspectives, there follows a description of Croc's job in Time's Arrow, which is in the business of saving time, literally shaving seconds from the conversation time of each and every call made to directory inquiries. Readers are also introduced to Croc's girlfriend Duchi, and learn that their marriage had been put on indefinite hold due to the events of September 11th. Their relationship is represented as toxic to both characters who constantly criticize each other's behavior. Later, feeling somewhat responsible for Guetta's death, Croc decides to travel to Jerusalem to attend his funeral and to meet Shuli. Enroute he picks up a soldier from Petach Tikva, who incidentally brags about the inhumane treatment of Arab men in Bethlehem by his platoon. Simultaneously as they pass near Shaar Hagai and stop behind a

No. 480 bus, readers learn that Fahmi and his brother shoot a volley of sniper shots at the bus, some of which accidentally hit the car and kill the hitchhiker, but miss Croc. In Jerusalem, Croc meets Shuli and together they begin a mission to unravel what Guetta was doing in Tel Aviv before his death, while having a brief love affair. The affair is brief because they are both part of a third attack when a bomb blasts a Tel Aviv restaurant leaving Shuli in a coma, and later dead. Croc becomes obsessed with the investigation of Guetta and this distracts him from his job. Meanwhile Croc's near death experiences make the news and he is hailed by the media as a symbol of the survival of Israel. After the arrest of his brother Bilahl, Fahmi has become a fugitive and begins working as a part-time cleaner in the Time's Arrow offices. Their lives fully intersect when Croc elicits Fahmi to aid him in unraveling Guetta's story. They learn that an Israeli doctor called Warshawski had contracted Guetta to assassinate an Arab man who had been having an affair with the doctor's Jewish wife. Meanwhile when the resistance learns of Fahmi's encounter with Croc, Fahmi is instructed to assassinate him and blow up himself in a suicide mission using a grenade. However, he hesitates at the last minute, opens the car door and throws the grenade out, but not without getting a shrapnel fragment in his frontal lobe. The novel ends with the death of Fahmi, who had been lying in a coma for the entirety of the novel. Croc survives for the fourth time.

The novel quickly sets the scene and the tone of the Israeli experience of political violence in the context of the Second Intifada. In the first few lines the character Croc explains the rationale behind his choice of riding a minibus instead of the regular No. 5 bus to work. He explains that, “A bus was too easy a target for a terrorist—especially the No. 5, which was almost always full and had already been bombed... And they were never going to bomb a Little No. 5. For one thing, they can only take ten people, eleven with the driver”.⁶ In this case, the narrator comments about the frame of mind of living within a violent context and the decision-making process which attempts to place this ‘terrorist’ violence within a semblance of logic. The narrator then describes the ensuing bombing of the No. 5 that seems to defy Croc’s attempt at logic. He mentions that while on the bus an elderly lady turned to him and asked about another passenger, “Quietly she said: ‘Doesn’t that man look suspicious?’ With her eyes she indicated a dark guy at the front... He was wearing a grey wool hat and holding a suit in a suit bag... I thought about the fact that explosive belts were the latest thing—the flavor of the month... just possibly there was one in his suit bag” (1). Croc then dismisses these ideas as paranoid and racist, thinking: “Why is everyone so

⁶ Assaf Gavron, *Almost Dead* (HarperCollins e-books, March 27, 2010), 1. Subsequent reference in text.

paranoid in this country? Can't dark guys get on buses with suit bags any more?" (2). This racial dimension of the conflict is more complicated given the fact that there are Arab-Israelis who are Jews, Muslims and Christians as well as a rising community of immigrating African-Israeli Jews. Julia Amalia Heyer clarifies that these communities face racist discrimination within Israel based on their ethnicity rather than their religious or political views.⁷ In fact, she points to a survey by the University of Haifa that found that,

...more than half of Jewish Israelis don't want to live next to Arabs. In another study, 63 percent of respondents said they agreed with the statement 'Arabs are a security risk and a demographic threat to the country,' while 40 percent felt that the government should encourage Israeli Arabs to emigrate.

Gavron's question: "Can't dark guys get on buses with suit bags any more?" brings attention to increasing cases of racial discrimination in Israel, but this critique is complicated when in the novel the old lady is actually right and the same suspicious "dark" character bombs the minibus. The complication stems from Croc's understanding that racial profiling is wrong in a context where violence is often racially motivated.

⁷ Julia Amalia Heyer, "Suspicion and Hate: Racist Attacks On Arabs Increase in Israel", *Spiegel Online International*, Jun 05, 2013, accessed on 20 Aug 2014 <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/racist-attacks-against-arabs-increase-in-israel-a-903529.html>. Subsequent reference in text.

In the opening chapter the narrator also highlights a cynical reaction to this violence. Croc mentions that on the minibus: "The radio was turned to a news show. They were talking about a bomb in Wadi Ara. The passengers were listening quietly. Then there was a song" (3). On entering his office building Croc comments that the entrance to the center looks like the gate to an army camp equipped with barriers, guards and metal detectors that always beep. He sarcastically adds that, "the guards never check the source of the beep so why do they run the detector over us? Just to send magnetic waves through our bones?" (6). This opening scene presents a familiarity with violence in the sense that it becomes an aspect of daily life, heard on the radio before a song, and emphasized by the image of metal detectors constantly beeping while the source is never checked. The characters in this opening chapter also seem desensitized to this violence, some expecting it, others mocking it, and others overcoming it as quickly as possible and having ready-made reactions to it. At the end of the first chapter Croc mentions that:

Two and a half hours since the bomb went off, and it was as if nothing had happened, or almost. Some drivers were slowing down to peer at the wet patches before driving on. On the pavement beside me kids were lighting candles and people were shouting and crying. They had their solutions. They announced their solutions. They said: kill, retaliate, blast them to bits, withdraw... (11)

Here Gavron casually provides the varying views or reactions within Israel to such violence, varying from kill to withdraw,

without taking a particular stand or forcing a preconceived opinion on his readers. This section also alludes to a political strategy of dealing with violence, which is to get over it and undermine its consequences on Israeli daily life as quickly as possible. Later sections in the novel emphasize that strategy. For example, Croc recounts the official reaction of Time's Arrow to the attack. In a conversation with Switzerland following the bombing he asserts that there was nothing to worry about. He explains that company policy was to downplay "any whiff of terrorist activity" in the Middle East in general and the Tel Aviv area specifically.

If anything should happen and, with the help of the negative and sensationalizing global media, reach the ears of our overseas clients and potential investors, it should be treated with at most the interest an elephant might display at a fly landing on its forehead—not even a passing annoyance. (34)

The narrator again describes potential violence as terrorist activity, but also points to media coverage of this violence as negative and sensational especially if it begins to have a negative effect on Israeli overseas investors and potential clients. In this case the representation of this terrorist violence and its effect on Israeli society should be downplayed. These sections suggest that the term 'terrorism' is used internally within Israeli society to describe acts of Palestinian resistance but at the same time the effects of this terrorism are sometimes downplayed to promote the illusion of a normal life. The characters' sarcastic or cynical

reaction can be rooted in a disconnect between the experience and the shifting representation of this political violence.

At this point, however, the novel suddenly shifts perspective and allows the reader to focalize through the perspective of a Palestinian character, the presumed “terrorist”. This shift, which completely alters the narrative mood and style, actually sheds light on Croc’s story, completing and complicating it. In the second chapter, on the first occasion when readers are introduced to Fahmi, he explains that the suicide bomber on the minibus was called Shafiq and that Fahmi’s brother Bilahl “had found someone who knows the Jews, knew Tel Aviv well. He told Shafiq to go to a crossroads near Rabin Square, where they have their demonstrations and crowds gather... where there was always a gridlock at rush hour” (13). The significance of this statement is that it mirrors the same logic that Croc resorts to earlier, that the violence is not completely arbitrary but that it is methodical at least at the level of planning. The facts of the ensuing bombing demonstrate that the methodology does not necessarily hold at the level of execution. Fahmi then contemplates the last moments of Shafiq’s life, and how he must have felt:

...he must have felt whole. A moment away from heaven. The best feeling he’d ever had, better than anything he had imagined... And me, with Croc and the green grenade in Tel Aviv, how did I feel? Shafiq would have been sure at the end. Not like me. (13)

In this case, Fahmi presents the conventional idea about the mental state of a bomber in the last seconds before an explosion, feeling whole and sure about his actions; but also sheds doubt about this notion by explaining that he himself had doubts in those final moments. Although readers need to reach the end of the novel to understand what Fahmi is referring to, these statements foreshadow the gradual humanization of the perceived perpetrator who is presented as possibly 'unsure' at termination rather than an unthinking machine of destruction, a walking time bomb. In fact the perspective of Fahmi, as it gradually unfolds in the novel, does not necessarily justify political violence in as much as it grounds this violence within a continuously demoralizing socio-political reality: the experience of being Palestinian.

What actually begins as a seemingly typical story about terrorism gradually begins to change as both main characters look back into the past and narrate their back-stories in the first-person. These narratives about parents and grandparents offer readers understanding not only of who the characters are, but also how they got to be in those particular physical and psychological spaces. These histories, which are paralleled in the present context, also emphasize a major theme in the novel, which is that political violence in the Israeli-Palestinian experience is cyclical and repetitive. Chapter three begins with Croc narrating stories about

his family and his past. He explains that he grew up in Jerusalem but moved to Tel Aviv for work. His brother had left Israel with his wife and three boys because of the bombs, and his younger sister also wanted to join him with her husband. He explains that they all have American citizenship because their parents are originally American, his father from Maryland and his mother from Denver.

They came to Israel before I was born. God knows what they were thinking of... Maybe they were excited by the young Jewish state. Maybe it seemed exotic. Or maybe it was that Dad had big ideas: he wanted to teach the young country how to spread peanut butter on its toast. But the land of the Jews didn't have time for peanut butter, or, at any rate, not for the one he imported. (17)

The narrator's tone is sarcastic in this section as he critically questions his parents' motivations for immigrating to Israel from the United States. Croc points to excitement over the young Jewish state, the appeal of the exotic or business potential as possible motivations for immigrating. Croc then moves on to explain the fate of his parents today in Israel:

When I see them now, it's as if every bomb blows another brick out of the wall of the decision to emigrate. Their mistake. They can't blame us for running away, but their hearts are breaking. It's difficult, what they did: leaving the comfortable life in America while they were still young, travelling to a new, hot, primitive country and trying to build something from nothing: a family, a business, a state. They called it Zionism. (17)

Croc's tone in this section is initially sympathetic to his parents' disappointment yet he is also harsh on them because "they made a

choice". They left comfort for novelty and economic potential, following a dream. The tone of the passage suggests that Palestinian resistance/violence in the form of bombings has turned the Zionist dream into a nightmare, or at least reverses it. Slavoj Žižek in *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, comments about this dream/nightmare conception of Zionism. He explains that:

Over the last two thousand years, when the Jews were fundamentally a nation without land, living permanently in exile, with no firm roots in their places of residence, their reference to Jerusalem was, fundamentally, a purely negative one, a prohibition against 'painting an image of home', against feeling at home anywhere on earth. However, with the process of returning to Palestine... the metaphysical Other Place was directly identified with a determinate place on earth... The mechanism is well known: after an object is lost, it becomes a stand-in for more, for all that we miss in our earthly lives. *When a thousand-year-old dream is finally close to realization, such a realization can only turn into a nightmare.*⁸

Žižek here suggests that the realization of a dream of returning to a lost home turns the metaphysical concept of "home" into a determinate one. The determinate can never fulfill its expectations, and therefore cannot avoid turning the dream into a nightmare. This section concerning Croc's parents and siblings however demonstrates that families like Croc's who immigrated after the formation of the state of Israel and who have dual nationality had and still have options: immigrating to and remaining in Israel and fighting for the Zionist dream, or returning to American safety.

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (London: Verso, 2004), 41. Subsequent reference in text.

These choices and the opportunity to escape from a violent reality continue to preoccupy Croc until the very end of the novel when he finally decides to remain.

Meanwhile Fahmi also narrates stories about his parents and their past. He explains that his parents met in Bir Zeit University and moved to Murair, his mother's birth village. He describes that in 1977 it was not common for a village girl to marry a refugee, or for the couple to move into the woman's house but that his parents did not care: "dignity wasn't all that important. Life was more important" (24). These choices are juxtaposed with what Fahmi describes as the conservative Palestinian choice. He explains that his grandfather Fahmi believed that refugees and the sons of refugees should remain in the camps, because leaving the camps would mean giving up their birthrights and accepting the situation:

It would be an admission that we would never return to the homes which the Jews had stolen from us. My older brother Bilahl thinks like Grandfather Fahmi. My younger sister Lulu loves life more than any idea of dignity, like Father. I'm not quite sure whose genes I got. (24)

This section demonstrates the choices that Fahmi's grandfather, parents, and siblings are afforded under the occupation. Grandfather Fahmi and Bilahl clearly make what Fahmi describes as 'the conservative choice' of dignity over a normal life, by staying and ultimately dying in the refugee camp. His parents and sister

choose a normal life by moving to Murair, a Palestinian village, and discarding many traditional Palestinian customs and values in order to survive. Fahmi oscillates between the two choices until his mother's death in Murair under the harsh conditions of the occupation. Fahmi ultimately decides to join his brother and move into the refugee camp and take up resistance against the state of Israel. He still promises his father that he would start studying in Bir Zeit University (26). The reference to Bir Zeit University is a continuous motif in the novel and suggests the potential life that Fahmi could lead, the potential of normality, which is presented in opposition to moving to the camps and joining the resistance. Readers at the end of the novel learn that Fahmi never gets to enroll in Bir Zeit University and actually dies in the aftermath of the aborted suicide mission. Fahmi's end suggests that the conditions established in 1948 have not changed significantly: Bilahl and Fahmi both end up in the refugee camp where their grandfather dies, and all three characters regardless of generation resist the same occupation violently, often using the same methods. This parallel –later emphasized in the discussion of Grandfather Fahmi – suggests that the Palestinian community is forced into a repetitive and stagnant state of birth, resistance, and death often also within the same physical and emotional space. Concerning the Palestinian experience of repetition, Lori Allen explains that:

Pictures from the first intifada were used as

illustrations in reports on the second, just as posters of young people martyred during the first intifada were redisplayed during commemorative events during the second. In this nonlinear, nondiscursive practiced poetic mode of image creation a historical consciousness, and rhetorical argument, is enacted. The commonly repeated observation that “we are living an ongoing Nakba” was not just a figure of speech. It was an expression of an experience of time, of a sense of the history and expected future that made violence unsurprising.⁹

This experience of time which is nonlinear and non discursive can be set against the experience of Croc’s family, who have literally and in many respects, come a long way in a short time.

Through the words of Croc, Gavron also mentions a much earlier model of immigration to Israel by narrating the historical background of a secondary character, his girlfriend Duchi, and moving back another generation to the 1930s. This example refers to the Jewish immigration to the British Mandate of Palestine before the creation of the Israeli state, as well as the Palestinian resistance to imperialism and Zionism at the time. Croc explains that:

In 1935, two weeks after British police had violently broken up Arab protests in Jerusalem, Izz ad-Din al-Qassam gathered his people and announced a Jihad...

⁹ Lori Allen, “Getting by the Occupation: How Violence Became Normal During the Second Palestinian Intifada”, *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 23, Issue 3, (2008): 467, 467, doi: 10.1525/can.2008.23.3.453.

One of those nights, a guard named Mahmoud Salam al-Mahmuzi ran into a Jewish patrol. He shot the commander of the patrol and killed him. Another policeman in the patrol ran to report the incident... The British retaliated fiercely. A large force was mobilized from all round Palestine and sent to Haifa. The next day five hundred British soldiers set out to catch Izz ad-Din al-Qassam. After a bloody battle which lasted all night, Sheikh al-Qassam was killed and became one of the first of the great martyrs, the *shuhada*, in the long struggle. He planted the seeds of revolution against Zionism and imperialism and inspired a generation to follow him. The policeman who ran to report the incident was Duchi's grandfather. (42)

The relevance of this information is to point to some of the roots of the conflict in 1935. In fact the frequent historical references that Croc makes serve more generally to root the conflict in its historical basis. This particular passage highlights British imperialist violence at the time: violent breaking up of an Arab demonstration as well as a fierce assassination of the then prominent sheikh and activist al-Qassam. According to Croc's narrative this initial political assassination of the sheik inspired and still inspires resistance fighters and martyrs today. Beverly Milton-Edwards mentions a further dimension to the incident that the novel does not broach. She explains that in October 1935 two Arab strikes broke out after a cache of arms destined for the Haganah was discovered in the port of Haifa. On November 8 the body of a British constable, Moshe Rosenfeld, was discovered near Ain Harod; Sheikh al-Qassam and his followers were believed to have been responsible for the death. After a rigorous manhunt, the

British police eventually surrounded al-Qassam in a cave in the village of Sheikh Zeid. In the ensuing firefight, al-Qassam and three of his followers were killed, and five captured.¹⁰ Gavron does not mention the Haganah cache of arms that Milton-Edwards posits is the stimulus for the Arab strikes and the novel proposes that the murder that prompted the manhunt of al-Qassam was of a commander of the Jewish Patrol, rather than a British (albeit Jewish) Constable. Both Gavron's as well as Milton-Edwards versions of this historic event highlight initial imperialist violence against Arab demonstrations as well as an assassination of a prominent Arab Sheik based on "probable evidence". In terms of al-Qassam and his legacy, Israeli New Historian Tom Segev quotes Ben-Gurion's reaction to the character of Sheikh Izz ad-Din al-Qassam, claiming: " 'A people doesn't forget so quickly that its country is being taken away from it. On more than one occasion, [Ben-Gurion] said that if he were Arab, he too would fight the Zionists'. Segev notes that in this case Ben-Gurion was a justifier of Arab patriotism in that "Ben-Gurion likened the heroic glory surrounding Izz ad-Din al-Qassam in the 1930s to Yosef Trumpeldor's fame".¹¹ Trumpeldor was a Russian Jewish Zionist

¹⁰ Beverley Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Politics in Palestine* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 29.

¹¹ Tom Segev, "Back to School: Ben-Gurion for Beginners," *Haaretz*, 22 Jun 2012, accessed on 25 Mar 2013, <http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/the-makings-of-history/back-to-school-ben-gurion-for-beginners.premium-1.440405>

who was killed in 1920 in Tel Hai by Arabs, and was believed to have claimed in his final moments that "... it is good to die for one's country".¹² In the novel, Croc's idiom seems to recognize and sentimentalize the Palestinian past and even glorifies al-Qassam. He uses terms such as "revolution", "the long struggle" and "the great martyr's" as well as the Arabic translation of the word *Shuhada* to describe the deeds of the sheik, rather than resorting to the more contemporary idiom of terrorism.

On the Palestinian side, the violence of the struggle is clearly recognized and justified as evidenced in the succeeding Fahmi section. In the following chapter Fahmi narrates his grandfather's fate in relation to the creation of the Jewish state. Fahmi narrates that during the 1948 war (the *Nakba* or disaster as it is known in the Arab world) Palestinians resisted the occupation violently. He explains that his grandfather and his friends would,

...descend from the village to the ridges above the road to Jerusalem and shoot at the buses... later they put armor on the buses and trucks, but Grandfather and his friends still found ways to attack... Eight months their heroics went on. And this is why he felt hurt when people talked about a defeat: because they fought like lions (37).

¹² Mitchell G. Bard, "Yosef Trumpeldor," *The Jewish Virtual Library*, June 25, 2013, accessed on 30 Mar 2013, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/trumpeldor.html>

Words such as *nakba*, *heroics* and *lions* emphasize a romanticized but highly disappointed perception of the past. Fahmi explains that after the defeat and the creation of the new state in 1949 his grandfather Fahmi Sabich moved to Al-Amari refugee camp, close to their village, Beit Machsir. Fahmi explains that many Palestinians had moved to the East Bank after their expulsion, but that his grandfather had decided to stay in the refugee camp, close to his village and close to the home that he had built, and which he was certain he would return to one day. But he never did: “he never saw his home or his friends or his cousins again” (23). In Al-Amari he met his wife Samira: “She came from Dir Ayub, a village that doesn’t exist anymore. The Jews didn’t even built a settlement where it had been. They just destroyed it and built a road” (24). The section highlights another impression in the Palestinian experience of 1948: finality. The sense of finality emerges in the idea of the village Beit Machsir, which grandfather Fahmi never returns to, and the cousins and family that he never again sees. The complete demolition of Dir Ayub and its subsequent transformation into a road also reinforces this sense of finality. The section actually points to the violent and systematic demolition of Palestinian villages in 1948, for example through Haganah plans like Plan Dalet or Plan D, which mentioned that:

These operations can be carried out in the following manner: either by destroying villages (by setting fire to them, by blowing them up, and by planting mines in their rubble), and especially those population

centers that are difficult to control permanently; or by mounting combing and control operations according to the following guidelines: encirclement of the villages, conducting a search inside them. In case of resistance, the armed forces must be wiped out and the population expelled outside the borders of the state.¹³

Israeli historian Ilan Pappé in his *The 1948 Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* explains that: “Once the decision was taken, it took six months to complete the mission. When it was over, more than half of Palestine’s native population, close to 800,000 people, had been uprooted, 531 villages had been destroyed, and eleven urban neighborhoods emptied of their inhabitants”.¹⁴ This inclusion of Palestinian injuries in a fictional work by an Israeli author does not necessarily excuse Palestinian violence. However recognizing these injuries and setting them up as rational or motivation behind acts of Palestinian violence allows readers to recognize a correlation. Gavron goes even further, by demonstrating that the terror orchestrated by the Israeli state is equally random and that there is an undeniable correlation between Israeli policy and Palestinian violence.

¹³ Yehuda Sluzki, *The Haganah Book*, Vol. 3, Part 3, (Tel Aviv: IDF Publications, 1964), 1942.

¹⁴ Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (London: One World Publications, 2006), xiii.

This is evident for example in Fahmi's account of his mother's death, which directly precedes his decision to move to the camp and begin his violent resistance. Fahmi narrates that a year earlier the Israeli army had erected a dirt ramp around Murair and blocked the entrance to the village. This blockade prevented water tankers coming from Ramallah to access the village, so that the wells in the village eventually dried up, developing a virus that infected many of the villagers. When his mother fell sick, the doctor advised that she needed clean water to compensate for all the liquids she was losing. He narrates:

I told the soldiers guarding the entrance to the village that my mother was dying and she needed water. They tried to contact their commanders. Time passed, and they got no response. They told us to stop nagging them and go home. An hour later they'd still not received an answer.... One of the soldiers gave me a bottle of water. (27)

This instance in the novel indicates the continued policies of the state on the one hand, but also how these policies directly or indirectly cause the loss of Palestinian life. Fahmi continues, explaining that:

The next morning I asked if we could take Mother to hospital. She was in a bad way. The soldiers were angry, told us we weren't the only ones, everybody was thirsty. The soldiers were talking on their mobiles and shouting at villagers who were begging them for help... The soldier who had given me water the previous day did not remember me. 'What d'you want from me? I'm on the phone to headquarters at my own expense! I'm trying to find out what happened to the tanker, OK? I know you're thirsty. I know you want water... But I wasn't asking for water by that stage; I was asking for an ambulance...

Mother died in hospital. She was forty-two. A week later they got rid of the ramp. (27-28)

The section indicates a political policy of occupation that attempts to continually demonstrate its power over the lives of those occupied, to ensure subordination, whether in the shape of checkpoints or the building of ramps and blocking of village entrances. The incident of the ramp and its inclusion in the novel, points to the randomness and absurdity of political violence in the context of occupation. The novel in fact points to the absurdity of these policies because they function as catalysts for more violent resistance. In effect the ramp and the blockade completely backfire as a defensive strategy, because they only result in a heightened antagonism.

Fahmi's mother was eventually taken to a hospital, but it was too late. The idea of time is ironically juxtaposed to Croc's job in Times Arrow, where every second counts in the saving of money. In this case, hours and days don't really count in saving human life. The concept of time is also emphasized in a later section where Fahmi discusses the difficulty of moving around through checkpoints and closures, which is the reality of living under occupation. The covert but powerful juxtaposition of saving seconds to make a profit of millions versus saving hours or days to get to water is an indication of the author's representation of the realities of *being*

Israeli and *being* Palestinian. In fact, this minor episode also suggests that regardless of the choices that Palestinians make, whether to struggle or to succumb, they are victimized by the occupation. Fahmi's choice to join the resistance fighters after his mother's death seems like a more heroic version of the inevitable death waiting for him in the village. He claims in a later section:

The world had turned on its head. The peace our father had longed for had turned out to be a monstrous Israeli deception. But he kept insisting that to struggle against it was even worse. Me, I preferred to think about something else. Until the army erected a dirt ramp around Murair... (56)

This sentence suggests that Fahmi's original apolitical persona could not be sustained after the incident of the dirt ramp and the death of his mother. The senseless death of a woman who had chosen the root of the "normal life" suggests that whether one resists or does not, they are both equally victimized in the context of occupation. This realization is perhaps the motivation that drives Fahmi to Palestinian resistance and into a vicious cycle of violence and counter-violence.

This cyclical nature of violence and counter-violence is a major theme that is reinforced in every violent episode in the novel. After the initial bombing of the No. 5 minibus readers learn through Fahmi and Bilahl's perspective as they listen to the news on the radio in a taxi that, "The [Israeli] security forces think the attack came from Nablus... [subsequently] The Jews had attacked Nablus

and destroyed Shafiq's family home" (53). This retaliatory attack is again presented as stimulus for more violence from the Palestinian side. The brothers decide to revenge Nablus through a second operation. Bilahl decides, following in his grandfather's footsteps, to shoot at the buses on the road to Jerusalem: "It's a symbol. It will shock them. They'll think they're back in '48. And the conditions there" (39). Simultaneously, Croc decides to attend Guetta's funeral in Jerusalem and gets on the highway from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. He picks up a soldier hitchhiker. As both characters begin listening to the radio news headlines concerning the earlier attack on the No. 5 minibus, the hitchhiker Humi comments:

'Fucking Cunts. They ought to wipe out the whole of Nablus.'
 ...'They came from Nablus? Tomorrow there's no Nablus. Day after that the guy from Hebron will think twice before going on his mission, because he knows that if he goes on Monday, there won't be any Hebron on Tuesday. Understand?' (61)

Croc considers this strategy as idiotic and contemplates "Another genius with his genius solutions. I wanted to say: and what happens if the guy from Hebron thinks twice and still goes? What have we accomplished then?" (62). This is a crucial question that the novel raises but does not directly answer. In fact, Gavron, through the mouthpiece of Croc, seems to be questioning that same Israeli state policy that Humi describes. The only possible accomplishment in the Humi scenario is wiping out the whole of

Nablus, and then possibly Hebron too. The novel actually highlights the retaliatory nature of violence in the Israeli and Palestinian context, and suggests that the effect of such retaliatory strategies is probably complete annihilation in the long run for both groups.

The character of Humi also suggests the dehumanizing policy of the occupation represented through the practices of some IDF soldiers and entire platoons. Croc narrates that:

[Humi] told me... He was serving in Bethlehem... His platoon commander said that if a single hair fell from the head of one of his soldiers then the whole of Bethlehem would go up in flames, because you don't mess with the Golani... This other time someone chucked stones at them from a roof top and a mate of his got this gash over his eyebrow and the platoon commander went wild and they went through all the houses in the street one by one, and pulled out all the men and covered their eyes with flannel blindfolds and tied their hands behind their backs with plastic cuffs... (64)

In the novel, Humi's character emphasizes the depraved behavior of his platoon in terms of dealing with Palestinians. His reference to his commander's assessments that if a single hair of any of his platoon members falls then he would wipe out the whole of Bethlehem indicates indiscriminate and disproportional retaliation, a single hair judged 'rational' enough for wiping out Bethlehem. While the novel does not spell it out, there is a suggestion that present policies of occupation that incite Palestinian violence and then utilize this violence to rationalize the

systematic demolition of Palestinian villages and towns is a continuation of policies which date back to the 1940s. Humi actually mentions that he is part of the Golani Brigade. Amos Harel explains that, "Golani has a complex image within the IDF. On one hand, it is known as a brigade that struggles with no small number of disciplinary problems and scandals, caused by bad behavior ranging from revolts against commanders to abuse of Palestinians".¹⁵ On the other hand the Jewish Virtual Library explains that, "The Golani brigade was formed on February 22, 1948... soldiers included members of the Haganah, residents of settlements in the areas of combat, and enlisted men from all over the country".¹⁶ These references strengthen the clear parallel between the shooting of the bus on the road in the present day context and the earlier narrative of Grandfather Fahmi in 1936, using the exact same strategy against the settlers and the Haganah.¹⁷ At the end of the shooting Fahmi clearly highlights the parallel between this operation and Grandfather Fahmi's resistance operation in 1948. Fahmi expounds on the scene: "The

¹⁵Amos Harel, "The IDF's Golani Brigade: Always first on the scene at the front line", *Haaretz*, 6 Jan 2009, accessed 30 Mar 2013, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/the-idf-s-golani-brigade-always-first-on-the-scene-at-the-front-line-1.267546>

¹⁶ "IDF Infantry Corps: Golani Infantry Brigade", Jewish Virtual Library, accessed 30 Mar 2013, http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Society_&_Culture/golani_brigade.html

¹⁷ "They'd descend from the village to the ridges above the road to Jerusalem and shoot at the buses..." (Gavron, 37).

skeleton of the bus below me. Grandfather Fahmi's bus"(67). This attack would suggest to an informed readership that the violence during the second Intifada could be mirrored in the violence of the 1930s and 1940s, and associated with the continuing formation of the state of Israel and the continuing Palestinian resistance to it.

After the attack Humi is killed while Croc manages to escape from the scene and runs from the road to the forest. He falls on to the damp thorns and begins to see himself:

...flying up, above the trees, above the clouds and the sky, looking down and seeing Earth quickly diminishing, zooming out from Shaar Hagai, from Israel, from the Middle East... and I was in space. I saw aliens fighting among themselves, creatures from different galaxies, and then I stopped. And looked down. Why does it matter who is where, and which people, on which piece of land? Zoom in to planet Earth. Continents fighting continents—black against white against brown against yellow. World wars. Zoom in towards the countries... the Middle East. Zoom in—Palestinians and Israelis. Zoom in—Orientals and Ashkenazis, right and left. Keep zooming in, to the cities, the quarters, the neighborhoods, street against street, house against house, flat against flat, husband against wife, brother against brother. Now zoom out... (74)

As the character of Croc momentarily and in a state of trauma, imagines an ascent to space he is able to shift perspectives and take a bird's eye-view of the entire universe. He continues to

ascend until he reaches space, where he sees aliens from far away galaxies also fighting amongst themselves. He stops and looks down at planet earth, and begins to realize that violence is the reality of the entire human race, continent against continent to brother against brother. The violence between Palestinians and Israelis is represented in this case as both a macrocosm of all our internal struggles and a microcosm of the struggles of our world. He questions, "Why does it matter who is where?" This pessimistic scene in the novel portrays both the instinctive nature of the conflict as well as its futility, suggesting that this is the human condition.

Conclusion

In *Almost Dead* both Palestinian and Israeli characters use derivatives of two particular terms throughout the novel to discuss acts of violence: 'terrorism' and 'resistance'. The term terrorist is used in the first couple of lines of the novel as Croc considers the likelihood of the No. 5 minibus being bombed. In the same first chapter Croc mentions that any whiff of 'terrorist activity' should be treated as a passing annoyance. In the novel the Israeli media clearly labels all acts committed by Palestinians as terrorist acts. The effect of this violence is exaggerated or understated depending on the audience and the consequence of that label. For example,

the effects of the violence are amplified in order to justify retaliation against entire villages, particularly in the vernacular of IDF soldiers, but understated to avoid economic repercussion from European investors in workplace scenarios. What is surprising is that the Israeli character Croc uses different terms to describe earlier forms of Palestinian violence. When he recounts the story of the death of Izz ad-Din an-Qassam in 1935, for example, he mentions 'Arab protests', the 'great martyrs', the 'long struggle', and 'revolution against Zionism and Imperialism'. In this case the character demonstrates a romanticized perception of the past that is not applied to the present. This phenomenon can point to a lack of conciliation with the past in the Israeli experience. Edward Said explains that:

Appeals to the past are among the commonest strategies in interpretation of the present. What animates such appeals is not only the disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded. Or whether it continues, albeit in different forms, perhaps. This problem animates all sorts of discussions—about influence, about blame and judgment, about present actualities and future priorities.¹⁸

This explanation suggests that Croc has not reconciled with the past, and cannot entirely dissociate the violence of the Palestinian past, which he describes as heroic, from the violence of the present. Gavron opens this idea for consideration and suggests through the

¹⁸ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 3.

Palestinian perspective that both forms of violence are not merely interconnected but that one is a continuation of another. The Palestinian character Fahmi clearly identifies with this view of the past to describe its continuation in the present. Fahmi refers to the violence committed by Palestinians during the second Intifada as 'resistance'. The term resistance differs from the term terrorism precisely because it suggests a reactionary rather than an unexplained and unwarranted violence. The term resistance for example was used historically to denote the bravery of the French opposition to the Nazi occupation of France.

The novel's ending is bleak especially for the Palestinian character. The author also insinuates that the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is a microcosm of the condition of all of humanity, and that violence is characteristic of our race. At the same time, the novel highlights the complexity of the context and focuses on perspectivism by moving between the experiences of three generations, be they Israeli or Palestinian. This historical reading as well as the humanization of both the Israeli and Palestinian characters might not offer solutions, yet it attempts to achieve something else. It attempts to modify the highly polarized framework through which the conflict is usually perceived.

CHAPTER V

Sirens of Baghdad

*...brutes festooned with grenades and handcuffs burst into
the gardens of Babylon, come to teach poets how to be
free men..."*¹⁹

The Sirens of Baghdad (2006) is the third novel by Yasmina Khadra, the pen name of Algerian author and army officer Mohammed Moulessehoul. The female pseudonym belongs to his wife and was adopted as a reaction to an army requirement that he submit his manuscripts to a censorship committee.²⁰ In *Sirens*, as well as his earlier novels *The Swallows of Kabul* (2005) and *The Attack* (2006), Khadra deals with the calamities of the Middle East, specifically Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine, and examines issues such as the human conscience in states of innocence and trauma, the culpability of nations in the making of terrorists and the extent to which free will and fatalism are mutually exclusive. *Sirens* was originally written in French and translated by John Cullen into English in 2007. It is presented as a stream of consciousness

¹⁹ Yasmina Khadra, *The Sirens of Baghdad* [2006] Trans. John Cullen (New York: Nan A. Talese, 2007), 12. Subsequent reference in text.

²⁰ Stuart Jeffries, "Reader, I'm a he," *The Guardian*. 22 Jun 2005, accessed 5 Feb 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/jun/22/france.world>

narrated entirely from a first-person Iraqi point of view in addition to a series of dialogues between other Iraqi characters. The novel noticeably lacks fictional subtlety and is characterized by an emphasis on the narrative voice rather than the authorial one. Author and critic Richard Marcus likens Khadra's style to that of Bertolt Brecht, explaining that while "we can fairly easily predict what will happen, that isn't important. What's important is why the story happens and how".²¹

The plot unravels both in flashback and circular geographical scope. The novel begins in Beirut where readers are introduced to the main character, an unnamed narrator who is the future perpetrator of a violent attack described as: "the greatest operation ever carried out on enemy territory, a thousand times more awesome than the attacks of September 11..." (11). The narrator converses with the character of Dr. Jalal, who represents the intellectual voice of Iraqi resistance, on a hotel balcony. The novel then moves on to the backstory of the narrator through two sections titled *Kafr Karam* and *Baghdad*. *Kafr Karam* is the birthplace of the narrator, a Bedouin village that is described by the narrator as innocent, secluded from Iraqi reality until the war

²¹ Richard Marcus, *Book Review: The Sirens of Baghdad by Yasmina Khadra*. BlogCritics. 27 Apr 2007, accessed 27 Jan 2014, <http://blogcritics.org/book-review-the-sirens-of-baghdad/>

finally comes to it. The narrator, who is in his early twenties, describes himself in flashback as an emotional person, devastated by other people's sorrow, and hating violence (96-97). In the context of the second Iraq war he witnesses three devastating events which alter his perception and life in Kafr Karam: the shooting of the village simpleton, the accidental US bombing of a wedding reception, and finally the storming of the narrator's home and manhandling and humiliation of his father at the hands of American GIs. Disgraced by his father's humiliation and unable to escape the violence of war, the narrator travels to Baghdad to avenge his honour. In the *Baghdad* section of the novel, the narrator witnesses and experiences the decomposition of the city, and is turned into a street bum until he is rescued by his cousin Omar the Corporal. He is then taken on by other young men from Kafr Karam and introduced to what the novel describes as the resistance movement. After his integration into the movement he is entrusted with his first mission, which involves being injected with a deadly virus and travelling to Europe (London) to spread the disease. Readers only find out the details of this violent plot in the last section, and learn that the narrator aborts the mission in the Beirut airport by choice in the last couple of pages.

While the invasion of Iraq by US forces in the second Iraq War in 2003 is the immediate context of the novel, the conflict between

the US and Iraq and its consequences dates as far back as the Cold War era and is discussed in various parts of the novel. Robert J. Pauly and Tom Lansford explain that at the time both superpowers, the US and the Soviet Union, used Iraq as a pawn in the bipolar struggle of influence in the Persian Gulf.²² The authors note that throughout these contests, and in spite of Saddam Hussein's repressive methods, the Iraqi leader emerged by the end of the 1990s as a leading figure of pan-Arab nationalism. In fact in the 1980s Iraq was the envy of the developing world in terms of investments in health, education and physical infrastructure.²³ The Iraqi invasion of neighboring Kuwait in August 1990, however, elicited an unprecedented and unanimous international political response. Sarah Graham Brown notes that the common goal of defending oil supplies signaled the end of the logjam imposed on the Security Council by the two Cold War powers, facilitated great military mobilization and elicited a very negative response in the Arab world.²⁴ The UN authorized a coalition of 34 nations led by the US and Saudi Arabia to attack Iraq. Aerial and ground assaults continued until both parties signed a cease-fire agreement. Brown

²² Robert J. Pauly, Tom Lansford, *Strategic Preemption: United States Foreign Policy and the Second Iraq War* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 1.

²³ David Rieff, "Were Sanctions Right?," *New York Times*, 27 Jul 2003, accessed 8 Feb 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/27/magazine/27SANCTIONS.html>

²⁴ Sarah Graham Brown, *Sanctioning Saddam: The Politics of Intervention in Iraq* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1999), 7. Subsequent reference in text.

explains that while Iraqi forces were retreating from Kuwait, a civil insurrection in the Basra area began, and was followed by other rebellions particularly in the Kurdish north (18). Saddam's suppression of these uprisings created a major refugee crisis that coincided with the passing of UNSC resolution 687 which imposed harsh conditions on Iraq including an economic embargo, which lasted till 2003. Former assistant secretary General of the UN, Dennis J. Halliday, describes the effects of these sanctions as a horrifying case of human suffering.²⁵ Robert Fisk details other international policies that were imposed on the defeated Iraq that led to a further and long-term humanitarian crisis:

As more and more Iraqis started to die – not only ravaged by the foul water they were forced to drink from bomb-damaged water-cleansing plants but increasingly prevented from acquiring the medicines they might need to recover – a UN commission redrew the country's southern border to deprive it of part of the Rumeila oilfield and the naval base at Um Qasr, Iraq's only access to the waters of the Gulf. The confiscated territory was given to Kuwait. Western leaders insisted that Saddam Hussein could use Iraq's own resources to pay for humanitarian supplies, willfully ignoring the fact that Iraqi financial assets had been blocked and oil sales prohibited. By the end of 1994, Iraqi inflation was running at 24,000 per cent a year and much of the population was destitute. On the streets of Baghdad, even the middle classes were selling their libraries for money to buy food. Volumes of Islamic theology, English editions of Shakespeare, medical treatises and academic theses on Arab architecture ended up on the pavements of Mutanabi Street in Baghdad:

²⁵ Dennis J. Halliday, "The Impact of the UN Sanctions on the People of Iraq", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Winter 1999): 29.

paper for bread... By 1996, half a million Iraqi children were estimated to have died as a result of sanctions. (703-704)

Twelve years later, and within the milieu of the War on Terror, the US administration launched another attack on Iraq, based on suspicion of possession of weapons of mass destruction. This operation, dubbed Operation Iraqi Freedom, consisted of 21 days of heavy military operations by US, UK, Australian and Polish troops which captured the city of Baghdad and deposed Saddam Hussein. In response an Iraqi insurgency emerged with the goal of fighting against the coalition forces as well as Iraqi security forces that were seen as collaborators. This situation led to an all out civil war in 2006-2008. Our novel is set in 2006 and deals with the consequences of almost two decades of political violence that resulted in the complete destruction of Iraqi society, economy and political institutions.

In the novel, the initial chapter titled *Beirut* brings attention to the narrator's self-identification, as well as his identification of the enemy. In this opening chapter readers are thrown headfirst into the mind of the unnamed narrator as he reflects on the nature of the Lebanese city of Beirut: He claims: "I'd imagined a different Beirut, Arab and proud of it" (1). The narrator is disenchanted with Beirut. He is critical of its "affected airs", "closer to its fantasies

than to its history"; he comments about its attempt to resemble the cities of "its enemies" (1). At an initial level the narrator identifies with Beirut on cultural and historical terms. Both, he and Beirut, are identified as Arab. This identification highlights ideologies of Arabism and pan-Arab nationalism that emerged in the region in response to Ottoman rule and British and French imperialism. Martin Kramer notes an ideological wing of pan-Arab nationalism formed in Syria and Iraq in the 1940s and 1950s, called Ba'athism. The term, which means renaissance or resurrection in Arabic, had as its main goal the creation of a single Arab state, based on a socialist system. In fact, the Ba'ath party that took power in Iraq in 1968 maintained this power until Saddam Hussein's overthrowing in 2003.²⁶ The initial reference to Arabism in the opening of the novel suggests the narrator's nationalist associations, rather than say his religious ones, even in the frame of the novel when the narrator is about to get injected with a deadly virus. The narrator also clarifies a further level of self-identification. He describes himself as a Bedouin, born in Kafr Karam. This secondary identification specifies a sub group of Arab Iraqis with a unique pattern of living. This detailed identification of the narrator is neither religious (Sunni, Shiite, Christian, or Jewish) nor ethnic

²⁶ Martin Kramer, "Arab Nationalism: Mistaken Identity", *Daedalus* 122, No. 3 (1993): 171-206, <http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/martinkramer/files/arabnationalism.pdf>

(Kurdish or Azeri). William B. Wunderle in *Through the Lens of Cultural Awareness* explains that there is a competition over resources and power between these different Iraqi subgroups that originates in religious and historical roots and natural geographic boundaries.²⁷ The novelist's choice of the Bedouin subgroup therefore is important because it bypasses this competition and focuses on the traditional Bedouin heritage, based on strict patriarchal and honor values as the driving motivation for the narrator's political involvement.

While the novel presents some of the specificities associated with the identification of the region and its peoples as Arab or Bedouin, it presents a more general sense of a western *other*. This generalization also has roots in Arabism and Pan-Arab nationalist ideologies. Adeed Dawisha explains that "the nationalist generation of the 1950s and 1960s came to believe fervently that the West would deliberately and effectively block the goals of Arab nationalism, that it would see the nationalist vision of an independent and assertive Arab nation as a dangerous move against Western economic and political interests in the area. The nationalist struggle, therefore, became essentially a struggle

²⁷ William D. Wunderle, *Through the Lens of Cultural Awareness: A Primer for United States Armed Forces Deploying in Arab and Middle Eastern Countries* (Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2007), 50.

against the West”.²⁸ This collective identification of the enemy as Western is reinforced in the narrator’s balcony meeting with the character of Dr. Jalal, who represents one possible voice of Iraqi intellectuals. The narrator describes Jalal as having had a long career as a teacher in European universities, making regular appearances in television studios, and bearing witness against the “criminal deviationism of his coreligionists” (6). However Jalal’s association with the Western world changes due to what the narrator describes as a case of intellectual racism. The narrator explains that:

Profoundly disappointed by his Western colleagues, aware that his status as useful rag head was outrageously supplanting any recognition of his scholarly accomplishments, [Jalal] wrote a tremendous indictment of the intellectual racism rampant among respectable coterie in the West and performed some incredible pirouettes in order to gain admittance to Islamist circles. At first he was suspected of being a double agent, but then the Imamate rehabilitated him, made him their representative, and gave him a mission. Today, he travels to Arab and Muslim countries to lend his oratorical talent and his formidable intelligence to jihadist directives. (6-7)

Jalal’s intellectual involvement with Islamist circles and jihadist directives is not described as sign of religious fervor, but mainly as a pursuit of recognition and retribution against perceived Western discrimination. The narrator then asks Dr. Jalal whether he thinks

²⁸ Adeed Dawisha, “Requiem for Arab Nationalism,” *Middle East Quarterly* (Winter 2003): 25-41, accessed 28 Jun, 2014, http://www.meforum.org/518/requiem-for-arab-nationalism#_ftn8

Iraqi intellectuals will join the struggle, and turn rage into pride by telling their story (8-9). Dr. Jalal explains that a number of intellectuals will surely join. The rationale that he provides revolves around the relationship between Arab intellectuals and the West, and what he describes as an identity crisis: "The West is nothing but an acidic lie, an insidious perversity, a siren song for people shipwrecked on their identity quest" (9). This siren song refers to Homer's *Odyssey*, and the characters of the two sirens whose sweet tempting songs promise knowledge and wisdom yet lead men to their demise. The reference at this point to the siren song might suggest that in the Iraqi context the rhetoric of the West which has tempted intellectuals and promised freedom, democracy, and equality to the Iraqi people has perversely led to death and destruction. But the title of the novel, *The Sirens of Baghdad*, foreshadows that just as the sirens of the West are perceived as perverse and deceptive, so too will be the siren songs of resistance in Baghdad; songs that ultimately lure the narrator to violence and death.

The relationship between the characters and the Western world is also treated through a second dialogue that takes place in the last Beirut section. Through the character of Dr. Jalal and another secondary character, his novelist friend Mohamed Seen, Khadra suggests that violence is not the only response available to Iraqis in

particular and Muslims in general. The character of Dr. Seen actually bears a close resemblance to Khadra himself and might represent the only clear authorial perspective presented in the novel. Like the author of the novel, Seen is an Arab author living in Paris and promoting the power of the word to provide a more just representation. In fact, in an interview Khadra himself explains that: ""We are living in an age where much of the media coverage of the Orient is lies and fabulation... In the end, the novel is a tool, an instrument, which makes truth accessible. Only fiction tells the truth".²⁹ To illustrate the power of fiction and myth in the context of political violence and the quest for representation Seen explains:

The West is out of the race. It's been overtaken by events. The battle, the real battle, is taking place among the Muslim elite, that is, between us two and the radical clerics... the struggle is internal. Muslims are on the side of the person who can project their voice, the Muslim voice, as far as possible. They don't care whether he's a terrorist or an artist... They need a myth, an idol. Someone capable of representing them, of expressing them in their complexity, of defending them in some way. Whether with the pen or with bombs, it makes little difference to them. And so it's up to us to choose our weapons... (274-275)

In his speech Seen presents an important analogy between the pen and the bomb, the artist and the terrorist, specifically focusing on the idea of voice and representation. Seen explains to Dr. Jalal that

²⁹ Gerry Feehily, "Yasmina Khadra: tools in the war for truth", *The Independent*, 7 Jul 2006, accessed 20 Jun 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/yasmina-khadra-tools-in-the-war-for-truth-406905.html>

it is the responsibility of the intellectuals to utilize the power of voice as opposed to the power of violence to acquire representation. Dr. Seen emphasizes that to the masses radical clerics and artists are interchangeable, and can galvanize people through their capacities for creating what is perceived as a just representation. In the novel Khadra pits the characters of the two intellectuals against each other, and each seems to present a specific philosophical take on the idea of resistance. Dr. Jalal is more interested in resistance as an aspect of confrontation with the West. He explains that “[the West] called indigenous men ‘natives’ and free men ‘savages’. It made and unmade mythologies according to its own good pleasures... Today the offended peoples have recovered their speech. They have some words to say... Weapons say exactly the same thing” (278). On the other hand, Dr. Seen is interested in an internal resistance or what can be even described as a renaissance that would clutch a deteriorating Iraq out of the hands of radical clerics and entrust it to the hands of Iraqi intellectuals. This Seen describes as the ultimate challenge in the context of Iraqi violence. The two characters in the novel’s frame represent a major philosophical debate concerning Iraqis’ reaction to political violence: Dr. Jalal is focused on retribution against the West while Dr. Seen is focused on the possibilities of a self-induced revival.

The flashback section of the novel adds depth to this debate by delving further into the personal and collective experience of violence and displaying the consequences of violent resistance on Iraqi characters themselves. In the flashback section titled *Kafr karam* Khadra illustrates a series of tragic encounters between an authentic Bedouin village and the corruptive forces of war. And through a parallel between the village and the main narrator, the novel manages to present both the individual and the collective consequence of this encounter. In the opening of the section Kafr Karam is described as a secluded village, excluded from the reality of occupation:

Kafr Karam: A miserable, ugly, backward town... It used to be a snug little spot, way out in the desert. No garlands disfigured its natural aspect; no commotion disturbed its lethargy. For generations beyond memory, we had lived shut up inside our walls of clay and straw, far from the world and its foul beasts, contenting ourselves with whatever God put on our plates... We were poor common people, but we were at peace... (11-12)

The narrator's description suggests that the village was initially innocent, a clean slate, unaffected to start with, until it is polluted by war: visitors and news from Baghdad, TV, and then actual US troops and missiles. These elements turn it into a miserable town. Like the village the narrator is also initially described as innocent. He explains that in Kafr Karam, "people think it's better to die than to sink into vice or thievery. The call of the Ancients drowns out the siren's song, no matter how loud. We're honest by vocation"

(18). In this case, the narrator and others from Kafr Karam are described as a collective; their common traits are a result of Bedouin values that have traditionally superseded personal ones. In fact, Khadra's decision to keep the narrator unnamed is indicative of this type of Bedouin collectiveness. The unnamed narrator is also unmarked among a plethora of characters that emerge in this chapter. For example readers are introduced to other young men at the town cafe: the narrator's cousins: Omar, Kadem, and Majed; there is also Yaseen Doc Jabir's grandson, Salah the blacksmith's son-in-law, Adel, Bilal the son of the Barber, Khaled the taxi owner, Sayed Bashir the Falcon's son, and Harun and Malik, among others. All these young men, as well as the narrator, experience a similar fate. They are all inevitably drawn to violence.

The parallel fate, or the transformation of Kafr Karam, our main narrator and all of the secondary characters from states of innocence to states of emptiness and then misery, as Khadra puts it, is directly related to the US invasion. The narrator explains that "hostage to its own emptiness", the village was eroding a little more every day, and that the youth of the village were "vegetating on another planet", cut off from the tragic events eating away at their country (48). The first level of transformation reveals itself in the souring of relationships between the inhabitants, especially the

abandonment of the Bedouin hierarchy of age, which the narrator attributes to the state of guilty conscience felt by the young men. Through various social interactions and discussions at the village cafe and barbershop Khadra illustrates these changes. For example in the cafe, the narrator points out that:

[If] relations in the village were turning ugly, it was because of the news coming out of Fellujah, Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra, while we floated along, light years away from the tragedy depopulating our country... This feeling that we were excluded from history had developed into a genuine case of conscience. The older people seemed to be resigned to it, but the young men of Kafr Karam took it very hard. (45)

The choice of the term 'case of conscience' suggests that the physical exclusion of the village from hostilities, in the midst of news of death and destruction, does not necessarily imply an emotional exclusion. In fact, it generates a contrary emotion of guilt in the young men who feel morally liable yet physically incapable. And while the narrator claims that the elders of the village are resigned to the exclusion, their discussions illuminate some of the grievances towards the US. For example, through a discussion in the barber shop Khadra presents a parallel between the terror of Saddam Hussein's rule and the terror of the US invasion. The narrator clarifies that before, at the time of Saddam they had to avoid certain topics because "spies were always on the alert. One inappropriate word, and your whole family would be deported... but ever since the tyrant had been caught in one rat hole and shut up in another, tongues had loosened" (31). In this

case, the villagers have more freedom to express their emotions, in part due to the US invasion, yet these emotions are critical of the same invasion. While this might seem like a contradiction, Khadra explains the rationale through the perspectives of three village elders. The first perspective is voiced through the character of Bashir the Falcon, “a former highway robber who had scoured the region at the head of an elusive band before taking refuge in Kafr Karam” (31). The Falcon explains: “If Saddam tyrannized us, it was because of our own cowardice, large and small... People have the kings they deserve... He was a monster, yes, but he was our monster. He came from among us, he shared our blood, and we all contributed to consolidating his megalomania” (32-33). The Falcon in his speech goes on to question the intentions of the US invasion, and suggests that it’s a matter of economic benefit. He questions: “Why do you think they’re here... is it Christian charity? They’re businessmen, we’re commodities, and they’re ready to trade. Yesterday, it was oil for food. Today, it’s Saddam for oil” (33). The Falcon presents some of the discontent with an international community that is perceived as manipulative and abusive of Iraq, specifically referencing the Oil-for-Food program that was established in 1996. The program which was meant to allow Iraq to sell oil in exchange for humanitarian supplies, principally food and medicine, has been systematically charged with claims of loose management, corruption, bungling, “ignoring Iraqi oil smuggling

and failing to restrain the surcharges and kickbacks that [the UN] knew Saddam Hussein was using to manipulate the program”, among other international scandals.³⁰ These types of interventions in Iraq have led to a loss of faith in the international community and in its motivations for involvement in the region. On the other hand, Doc Jabir, a former philosophy professor, whom Saddam’s jails had elevated to the status of hero, comments on the contradictions within the forceful imposition of democracy. He suggests that there is no freedom when there is no sovereignty, and that the point of the invasion is precisely to dislodge Iraqi sovereignty and not to strengthen it. He questions: “Why did Bush attack our country?” and provides the answer:

The US was extremely worried about two things that might interfere with its hegemonic projects. One: Our country was very close to acquiring full sovereignty—that is, a nuclear weapon... The second thing the USA knew was Iraq was the only military force in the region capable of standing up to Israel. Bringing Iraq to its knees would make it possible for Israel to dominate the Middle East. (34-35)

In this speech the character clearly associates sovereignty with nuclear power, suggesting that military power is the only means for political self-determination. He also emphasizes that the US has hegemonic projects for the Middle East that would have been undermined by a sovereign (militarily capable) Iraq. The second

³⁰ “The Oil-for-Food Failures”, *The New York Times*, 8 Sep, 2005, accessed 4 Sep, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/08/opinion/08thu2.html?_r=0

element to note is the question of Israeli domination of the region. In this case, the US and Israel are viewed as a common entity, with US intervention in the Middle East therefore perceived as necessarily serving Israeli political agendas. Finally, the village elder provides yet a third perspective on the rationale behind the US invasion, proposing that it is due to Arab weakness and loss of faith (36). These three perspectives illustrate the overall perception of the US intervention, which is viewed by the characters as self-serving and hypocritical.

A closer look at the response of the youth of the village also illustrates that the proclaimed rationale behind the invasion of Iraq is actually counter-productive, in that it directly and unavoidably leads the youth to the path of violent resistance. The initial disillusionment of the narrator and the village is solidified with actual and first hand experience of US violence. Each experience is presented as a siren calling our narrator as well as many other young men to the path of violent resistance. The first encounter between the narrator and the American GIs revolves around a medical emergency, when Sulayman the village simpleton, and son of the blacksmith, is injured and in need of medical assistance. Our narrator and the blacksmith are forced to leave the village in pursuit of a health clinic in a neighboring village. On route to the village they encounter a checkpoint and the GIs:

The GI didn't understand very much of what the blacksmith was trying to tell them; the fact that someone would address him in a language he didn't know seemed to infuriate him, and so he became doubly angry... When the black GI leaned in for the other passenger, he noticed the blood on Sulayman's hand and shirt. "*Goddam! He's dripping blood,*" the soldier shouted... "*This asshole's wounded.*" Sulayman was terrified... the blacksmith cried out to the Iraqi soldier. "he's mentally ill" Sulayman slid across the seat and got out of the car in confusion...the GI screamed his orders as belligerently as before... Suddenly Sulayman gave his cry—penetrating, immense... [he] took off like an arrow, running in a straight line... "Don't shoot," the blacksmith pleaded partly in English. "He's mentally ill. Don't shoot. He's crazy." Sulayman ran and ran, his spine straight, his arms dangling, his body absurdly tilted to the left. Just from his way of running, it was obvious he wasn't normal... The first gunshot shook me from my head to my feet, like a surge of electrical wire. And then came the deluge... every bullet that struck the fugitive pierced me through and through... Sulayman's head exploded like a melon... (57-58)

Before delving into the reactions to this event, it is worthwhile addressing the important element of language and communication; the mishandling of both in this case turns a critical situation into a tragedy. Another detail in this encounter is the perceived arrogance of the American GI, and the lack of humanization in the treatment of Iraqi citizens who are not heard and whose deaths are simply collateral damage. The narrator goes on to clarify that this incident is not exceptional and that "Incidents of this kind were commonplace in Iraq" (59). He explains: "I didn't completely grasp what was happening. I was inside a sort of evanescent bubble, sometimes suspended in a void, sometimes fraying apart like a cloud of smoke" (60). The unraveling that the narrator

experiences is paralleled in the village, where tensions also begin to rise between the young men who feel emasculated by the event. In a dialogue between Salah and Yaseen on the evening of the funeral of Sulayman, tensions erupt as Yaseen accuses Salah claiming: “you cried like a woman, and that’s unacceptable” (64). Concerning feelings of impotence and emasculation in response to US violence in Iraq, Mohamed Hafez in a study on suicide bombers notes that the photos of men and women enduring humiliating torture in Abu Ghraib have been used by insurgents to personalize the suffering and heighten the sense of powerlessness and indignation that many Muslims feel.³¹ While Shilbey Telhami goes further, stating that they were photos of “utter humiliation in a region where humiliation is the pervasive sentiment that allows militants to exploit potential recruits”.³² Indeed feeling incapable in the face of unjustified and humiliating violence serves as a siren song to the path of violent retribution. The first siren song in this case is illustrated through the mouthpiece of Sayed Bashir the Falcon’s son, a mysterious young man, “said to be close to the Islamist movement” (62). He claims in the same evening that:

Iraqis have been fighting the enemy for a long time.
Every day, our cities crumble a little more, blown up
by car bombs and ambushes and bombardments. The

³¹ Mohammed Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom* (Washington: US Institute of Peace Press, 2007), 143.

³² Shibley Telhami, *The Stakes: America in the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002), 14.

prisons are filled with our brothers, and our cemeteries are gorged with our dead... If you really think what you say, translate talk into action and make those goddamned Americans pay for what they've done. (67)

This speech demonstrates a possible ideology that could restore masculinity and identity. The novel demonstrates that as a result of the incident, the first group of young men from the village become involved in violent resistance against the US as well as the Iraqi police and the state. In fact, after the incident of Sulayman's murder, six of the young men from the village disappear. Readers are told that three weeks later unknown persons set fire to the pumping station, there was an attack on an Iraqi police petrol which resulted in some fatalities, two vehicles were destroyed and various weapons were carried off by the attackers. Readers also learn that rumors in the village raise this ambush to the status of a heroic action (84-85). In this case, Khadra points to the death of Sulayman as the first catalyst unraveling the village and turning its youth towards the path of violence, particularly in their need for retribution.

The second tragic experience of US violence, and the second step in the unraveling of our narrator, revolves around a missile coming down on the reception hall of the Haitem's wedding, a well-to-do family in a neighboring village. The official response justified the bombing by claiming that US drones had detected suspicious

signals coming from around the reception hall, with a suggestion that terrorist movements had previously been reported in that sector. When the local residents rejected this assertion the Americans deplored the mistake and apologized to the victims' families (98). The narrator explains the horror of the event claiming:

A voice knocking at my temples kept repeating that the death stinking up the orchards was contaminating my soul, and that I was dead, too... You don't pass from jubilation to grief in the blink of an eye... People don't die in bulk between dance steps; no, what happened at the Haitians' made no sense. (97-98)

A grieving father comments to foreign television teams: "Look! Nothing but women and children! This was a wedding reception! Where are the terrorists?... The real terrorists are the bastards who fired the missile at us" (94-95). This comment highlights the subjective and partial nature of the usage of the term "terrorist" in contemporary media. Noam Chomsky in *Pirates and Emperors*.

International Terrorism in the Real World explains that:

The term "terrorism" came into use at the end of the 18th century, primarily to refer to violent acts of governments designed to ensure popular submission. That concept, plainly, is of little benefit to the practitioners of state terrorism, who, holding power, are in a position to control the system of thought and expression. The original sense has therefore been abandoned, and the term "terrorism" has come to be applied mainly to "retail terrorism" by individuals or groups. Whereas the term was once applied to Emperors who molest their own subjects

and the world, now it is restricted to thieves who molest the powerful.³³

The terrorism that the father is pointing to is precisely this earlier mood of state terrorism in which the powerful state, the US, has been systematically molesting the Iraqi population in the name of counter-terrorism. More importantly, the novelist suggests that these “counter-terrorism” operations, only serve to antagonize the population and elicit a violent response, which is then used to justify the ongoing molestation. The violent error of bombing a wedding reception in search of terrorists actually prompts six young men from the village to pursue violent revenge, by joining the ranks of the *Shaheeds*—martyrs:

[In] Kafr Karam, anger had unburied the war hatchet: Six young men asked the faithful to pray for them. They promised to avenge the dead and vowed not to return to the village until the last “American boy” had been sent back home in a body bag... A few weeks later, the district police superintendent was shot to death in his official car. That same day, a military vehicle was blown up by a homemade bomb. Kafr Karam went into mourning for its first *Shaheeds*, its first martyrs—six all at once, surprised and cut down by a patrol as they prepared for a fresh attack. (98)

In this case, the novel demonstrates that in the Iraqi situation “suspicion of terrorist activity” causes the US to commit “terrorist” violence against the villagers, which in response prompts the villagers to resort to “terrorism” to avenge their dead. The

³³ Noam Chomsky, *Pirates and Emperors. International Terrorism in the Real World* (New York: Claremont Research & Publications, 1986), 2.

absurdity of course lies in the fact that all this violence is about natural resources and homogeny, and that the actual pretext for the Iraqi invasion, weapons of mass destruction, did not even exist. The cyclical utilization of the words “terror” and “terrorism” by both sides only functions to mask the reality of a US invasion of a sovereign state, exacerbate the violence on the ground and devastate the Iraqi population.

The third and final event, the siren call that ultimately drives our narrator to the path of violence is a personal tragedy involving his father’s honour. The narrator clarifies in a later section that:

For Bedouins, no matter how impoverished they may be, honour is no joking matter. An offense must be washed away in blood, which is the sole authorized detergent when it’s a question of keeping one’s self respect... Dignity can’t be negotiated. Should we lose it, all the shrouds in the world wouldn’t suffice to veil our faces, and no tomb will receive our carcasses without cracking. (133)

In this case, the narrator is commenting on the cultural practices of honour killing and revenge, *tar* in Arabic. And it is precisely due to these cultural beliefs that the third experience is particularly devastating to the narrator, not simply devastating but also fatalistic, since his response is obligatory. He explains:

A squad of American soldiers barged into my privacy... flashlights nailed me to my bed; weapons were aimed at me... Hands sieved me, pulled me from my bed, and flung me across the room. Other hands caught me and crushed me against the wall...Hellish insults erupted from the end of the hall. My mother,

ejected from her room, immediately collected herself and went to help her invalid husband...With his threadbare undershirt hanging loosely from his thin shoulders and his stretched-out-drawers fallen nearly to his knees... he pivoted on his heels and tried to go back to the bedroom to fetch his robe... The blow was struck, and the die was cast. My father fell over backwards; his miserable undershirt flapped up over his face, revealing his belly... and I saw while my family's honour lay stricken on the floor, I saw what was forbidden to see, what a worthy, respectable son, an authentic Bedouin, must never see: that flaccid, hideous, degrading thing... my father's penis, rolling to one side as his testicles flopped over his ass. (99-100)

The narrator explains that the “die was cast”, in this case his fate is sealed. He clarifies that, “a westerner can't understand, can't suspect the dimensions of the disaster. For me, to see my father's sex was to reduce my entire existence, my values and my scruples, my pride and my singularity, to a coarse, pornographic flash” (100). The certainty of the consequence of the experience is non-negotiable. The narrator concludes: “It was clear that sooner or later, whatever happened, I was condemned to wash away this insult with blood” (99-102). The character is in fact “condemned” to avenge his honour under the justice codes of Bedouin society. Joseph Ginat explains that Bedouin and rural Arab societies are “shame cultures”, meaning that individuals are controlled by public threats to personal reputation and honor.³⁴ Ginat adds that, “Public

³⁴ Joseph Ginat, *Blood Revenge: Family Honor, Mediation and Outcasting* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1997), 130.

shame reflects not only on the individual, but on his family and kin, and there are, therefore, strong familial sanctions on deviation from communal norms". It is worthwhile to mention that Bedouin justice codes are pre-Islamic and differ from Islamic Shari'a codes or state penal codes. The narrator explains that:

It was my duty to wash away the insult, my sacred duty and my absolute right. I didn't know myself what was mobilizing me. I was neither anxious nor galvanized; I was in another dimension, where the only reference point I had was the certainty that I could carry out to the fullest extent the oath my ancestors had sealed in blood and sorrow when they placed honour above their own lives. (160)

In this sense, the experience is fatalistic and there is no escaping it because of specific ethnic values and commitments, rather than religious or ideological beliefs.

While the Kafr Karam section of the novel suggests that US violence in the village is responsible for driving young men to violent resistance, the Baghdad section illustrates the corrupting and self-inflicting effects of this resistance on the city and its inhabitants. The narrator experiences the devastation of the city first hand and explains that once the tyrant had fallen, "Baghdad found much that was still intact: its forced silences, its vengeful cowardice, its large-scale misery" (149). This section illustrates the decomposition of the city, which in turn debases its citizens. The

narrator is turned into a street bum until his cousin, Omar, an army-deserter, rescues him. Omar suggests that while he had originally come to Baghdad to join the *Fedayeen*—resistance fighters who are comprised of Ba'th party militias and Muslim extremists—he became disillusioned by their methods that have resulted in the death of thousands of Iraqis. He maintains: “You don’t make war on your own country just to piss off the world” (160). Omar further clarifies his position in a later discussion with the narrator when he insists:

If you insist on fighting... Fight for your country not against the world... Don’t kill just for killing’s sake. Don’t fire blindly—we’re losing more innocent people than bastards who deserve to die... if you want to avenge an offense, don’t commit one. If you think your honour must be saved, don’t dishonour your people. Don’t give way to madness. (182-183)

The madness associated with the resistance revolves around the indiscriminate nature of the deaths that result from blind violence. Sadly, Omar himself is later murdered by the resistance—his cousins—who mistakenly assume that he is an informant. This is a clear example of the dishonouring of the Iraqi people, where cousin murders cousin after erroneous accusations. In this case, the novel also presents an equivalence between this event and GI violence, in the killing of Sulayman, for example: both represent blunders in the general confusion of war, justified through the catchall term ‘legitimate defense’ (57).

The rational and moral complexities and ambiguities of a violent struggle are implied through two dialogues between the narrator and members of the resistance. In the first dialogue the narrator meets Yaseen, the twins Hassan and Hussein, and Sayed, who represent the voice of the resistance. Sayed, who is the leader of the group, maintains that the invasion of Iraq is the outcome of US culture, which reduces all values to a dreadful question of cash. He explains that:

They're just infuriated retards, smashing valuable things, like buffalo let loose in a porcelain shop. They arrive here from an unjust, cruel universe with no humanity and no morals, where the powerful feed on the flesh of the downtrodden. Violence and hatred sum up their history... they know nothing of our customs, our dreams, or our prayers... all they see in our country is an immense pool of petroleum, which they intend to lap dry, even if it costs the last drop of our blood... Our streets are going to witness the greatest duel of all time, the clash of the titans: Babylon against Disneyland. (175-176)

The rhetoric of the resistance represents the conflict as a clash of cultures where both the US and Iraq are titans dueling against each other. The narrator, whose affliction is entirely personal, responds to this rhetoric in a telling manner. He reflects:

I was completely bamboozled. I felt as though I were in the thick of a farce, in the midst of a play rehearsal. Surrounded by mediocre actors who'd learned their roles but didn't have the talent the text deserved, and yet... it seemed to me that this was exactly what I wanted to hear, that their words were the words I was missing". (176)

The narrator describes these exchanges as theatrical. This could be a result of the dislocation between the heavily politicized rhetoric and the personalization of his individual grievance. Or it could point to another disconnect between the motivations of the resistance and the actual outcome of their violent methods, which only furthers Iraq's destruction. The passage also points to the earlier discussion between Dr. Jalal and Dr. Seen, and specifically to the need for representation, which could be either filled by radical clerics or intellectuals. In this case the narrator is perplexed by his awareness of the farcical nature of the rhetoric but also his need to hear these words. The resistance movement as it stands could be lacking rhetorical relevance and also as readers later discover, moral standards, but it is the only means of representation and mobilization available. Indeed the narrator joins the resistance. However he is not galvanized by any greater cause; his main concern is still to avenge his personal honour. When he volunteers for a suicidal mission, Sayed entrusts him with one: "The final mission. The mission that will bring the unconditional capitulation of the West and return us permanently to our proper role on the world's stage" (236). In this case, the narrator's personal rationale for joining the resistance is exaggerated and transformed by Sayed into a larger political cause.

In the second dialogue with Hussein, one of the twins, the novelist demonstrates some of the moral implications of the violent resistance. Hussein is described by the other characters as mad—having caught the laughing bug after watching his close friend Adel fail to blow himself up, and explode as a result of being shot at by the police. Hussein is avoided in all major operations and consigned to responsibilities such as buying provisions or transporting people in an old car (210). Hussein explains to the narrator: “Our cause is just, but we’re defending it badly” (210): he relates a tragic story which exemplifies the moral dilemma associated with Iraqi internal resistance:

You know how Adnan, the baker’s son, died? The story is, he flung himself historically against a checkpoint, but that’s crock. He was sick of all the slaughter. He’s been in action full-time, sniping one day, blowing things up the next. Targeting markets and civilians. And then one morning, he blew up a school bus, killed lots of kids, and one of the bodies wound up in a tree. When the emergency units arrived on the scene, they picked up the dead and wounded, put them in the ambulances, and took them to the hospital. It was only two days later that people on the ground began to smell the dead kid decomposing up in the tree. Adnan happened to be in the area that day—just by chance—and he saw the volunteers pulling the kid out of the branches... [Adnan] completely flipped... One night, he put on a belt stuffed with loaves of bread... around his waist, so they looked like sticks of dynamite—and went to the checkpoint and started taunting the soldiers... Adnan was reduced to a pulp. (211-212)

The story of Adnan is another example of the madness associated with Iraqi violence. The absurdity and horror of a body of a young

boy rotting in a tree is the epitome of the decomposition of the city and its inhabitants alike. The effect of witnessing and being responsible for such an act drives Adnan to madness, and ultimately suicide. Indeed the novel demonstrates that violence in all its forms whether inflicted or self-afflicted is a driving force in and of itself, directing the fate of the characters. The fatalism of this siren call is addressed in the last section of the novel through a final treatment of the narrator himself and his choices.

The last section of the novel, *Beirut*, presents some of the ambiguities relating to the concepts of inevitability and free will, specifically focusing on the idea of individuality. This section is narrated in the present tense and demonstrates the narrator's immersion in the violence of the resistance, and also his rejection of it. The narrator is entrusted with an operation: he is injected with a deadly virus and expected to travel to the UK to spread the disease. His mission revolves around "riding the subway and going to train stations, stadiums, and supermarkets, with the goal of contaminating the maximum number of people" (288). This mission is not typical; it represents the epitome of blind violence against innocents but also against the narrator himself who will share their fate, in a violent act of suicide. While the narrator maintains that he will commit to this act in the name of his family and country, he questions: "Virus or bomb, what's the difference,

when you're grasping an offense in one hand and, in the other, a Cause?" (269). In this case the narrator is aware of the difference between his personal offense and the more general Cause and that while he is grieving a personal offense, he is exacting a wide-ranging revenge.

The concern over the individual versus the collective in itself however does not tempt the narrator to abort the mission. The narrator proceeds, and is driven to the airport to carry through with the operation. Interestingly, the airport section demonstrates the novelist's opinion of the futility of the security measures employed to fight terrorism. The narrator passes through metal detectors and is searched; yet he manages to get to the waiting area. In the waiting area the novel again focuses on individuals as the narrator mentions details related to the passengers waiting for their flight. He observes that on his right is an old woman who constantly pulls out her cell phone to check for a call that doesn't come. Behind him are an expectant father and his wife. The father "attends to [his wife's] every need, alert to the slightest sign from her, eager to show her how deeply he's enraptured" (300). And finally a young European couple, "their arms around each other and their golden hair covering their faces. The boy is tall, with a fluorescent orange T-shirt and ripped arms. The girl, as blond as a bale of hay, has to rise up on her toes in order to reach her

boyfriend's lips. Their embrace is passionate, beautiful, generous" (300-301). The details that the narrator recounts emphasize the individuality and humanity of each of these passengers. And it seems that the target of his attack, the violent oppressor, the West, alters from foreign policy and armies on the ground to fathers and mothers, the old and the unborn children. And while the narrator does not clarify his rationale, readers can suspect that it is this humanity that he witnesses which forces him to abort his mission. The use of the word *force* here is appropriate since the narrator claims: "I head for the exit. My mind's a blank, and I let my feet carry me. I have no choice" (303). The narrator aborts the mission, through what readers might suspect is an act of free will. Yet he maintains that he had no choice. When Shakir, a member of the resistance, picks him up he explains, "I was at the gate. I watched the passengers boarding the plane and I didn't follow them" (304). When asked why, he responds: "I have no idea" (304). The novel does not provide an answer to the driving force that would stop an individual from causing harm to others. Instead, the novel tempts readers to examine the inevitability of the narrator's quest for vengeance in a context which does not provide adequate representation or opportunity, and it invites readers to consider the humanity of all those who experience violence on a daily basis yet do not reciprocate.

Conclusion

In *Sirens of Baghdad* the context is generally described as a state of war: 'Babylon against Disney Land'. The violence committed by Iraqis in this context is also described repeatedly as 'resistance' and the unnamed character as well as other characters from Kafr Karam are drawn to the resistance movement in Baghdad. The novel has one reference to the term 'Islamist circles' and 'Jihadist directives', specifically in the section dealing with the character of Dr. Jalal who gains admittance into these circles once he abandons the Western intellectual scene. The novel seems to merge these two terms together though there is a distinction between them. Professor of Middle East studies and international relations Fawaz A. Gerges explains that:

Mainstream Islamists—that is, Muslim Brothers and other independent activists—represent an overwhelming majority of religiously oriented groups (in the upper 90th percentile), whereas militants or jihadists are a tiny but critical minority. The mainstream Islamists accept the rules of the political game, claim to embrace democratic principles, and renounce violence... The primary goal of modern jihadism is and always has been the destruction of the atheist political and social order at home and its replacement with authentic Islamic states.³⁵

³⁵ Fawaz A. Gerges, "Understanding the Many Faces of Islamism and Jihadism," *Nieman Reports* (Summer 2007), accessed 15 Mar 2014, <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/100207/Understanding-the-Many-Faces-of-Islamism-and-Jihadism.aspx>

The distinction in this case refers to Islamists as opposition movements partaking in the system whereas Jihadists represent the aspiration to violently alter that system. The narrator does not seem to recognize this distinction. This suggests either that the general population does not make this distinction and considers Islamists Jihadists or that Khadra himself does not make a distinction in a criticism of both. This later interpretation has more merit given the recurrent voices of characters in the novel that seem to shun violence and describe it as the tool of the 'radical clerics'. In the novel, it is the teaching of these radical clerics that has turned the Iraqi context into a devastating civil war.

There is only one reference to the term terrorism in the entire novel. Secondary characters from the village refer to the term terrorist by questioning who the real terrorist is. In this case they are referring to the violence of U.S. troops responsible for the death of innocents. The young men of Kafr Karam committing violent retaliation and avenging these deaths are described in the novel through religious terminology such as 'martyrs' or 'Shaheeds', though this is not under the license of Islamism or Jihadism.³⁶ The act of martyrdom, *Shihada*, or bearing witness in

³⁶ In fact, among other interpretations, the term martyr, or Shaheed according to the Muslim Sunna, included: "Whoever is killed while protecting his property then he is a martyr".

the unnamed narrator's case is not based on religious ideology but rather on a nationalist struggle against a perceived oppressor. The novel clearly distinguishes between these two causes, highlighting that the religious terminology is cultural rather than ideological.

In the novel there is also one reference to the term Fedayeen. The term Fedayeen actually refers to Ba'th party militias, who are also known as Fedayeen Saddam. According to Captain Ronald T. P. Alcala much of the post-invasion violence was ascribed to remnants of the old regime, including the Ba'th Party and the Fedayeen Saddam, who continued to fight following Saddam's ouster.³⁷ Even though Iraq's conventional forces were overwhelmed by the "coalition of the willing", these Iraqi units and irregulars put up stiff resistance and used unconventional tactics.³⁸ The term Fedayeen literally means "those who sacrifice themselves" and has been used by Armenians, Palestinian, Iranians, Iraqis as well as Eritreans in their national struggles.

"Translation of Sahih Bukhari, Book 43: Oppressions", *Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement*, University of Southern California, accessed 29 Mar, 2014, <http://www.usc.edu/org/cmje/religious-texts/hadith/bukhari/043-sbt.php#003.043.660>

³⁷ Ronald T.P. Alcala, "Vanquishing Paper Tigers: Applying Comparative Law Methodology to Enhance Rule of Law Development", *Army Lawyer*, Issue 454 (March 2011): 6.

³⁸ Kenneth Katzman, *Iraq: Post-Saddam Governance and Security* (New York: Nova Science Publisher, Inc., 2009), 18.

CHAPTER VI

The Reluctant Fundamentalist

The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2007) is the second novel by Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid. Hamid's three novels, which also include *Moth Smoke* (2000) and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), are all set primarily in Lahore, Pakistan. And though the author notes that he is not a propagandist for Pakistan, in an interview with Razia Iqbal he explains that as a novelist he wants to show what he sees and to 're-complicate' the oversimplified reality of Pakistan that is often presented in the news.¹ In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* Hamid illustrates the complexity of identity in an age of globalization, the mistrust between East and West after the events of 9/11, and the different forms of fundamentalism and terrorism that invariably accompany twenty-first century empire. Hamid's delicate manipulation of narrative structure and techniques, a monologue-framed narrative combined with high suspense and escalating tension and deliberate gaps in the narrative, emphasize this complexity. On the one hand the

¹ Mohsin Hamid, "Author Hamid Discusses hi Work," Interview by Razia Iqbal, Talking Points. BBC News, 21 Jun 2013, accessed 30 Jun 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20130621-pakistan-shattering-stereotypes>

novel can be interpreted as an amicable encounter of two strangers: a local and an American tourist in a Lahore café, or as a political thriller: a case of political assassination where both parties are possible perpetrators. By creating a plot with various possibilities of narratives Hamid and his novel tempt readers to question their own mind-sets and their own interpretative capacities. In an interview with Harriett Gilbert, the author explains that, “the ambition of the novel is to show the reader a bit of a mirror, to show that a lot of this novel isn’t really there. [Readers are] making it up as [they] go along. What are [they] making up and why?”² On another level, while the novel’s frame highlights political tensions and suspicions that exist between the two characters, a flashback narrative embedded within the frame provides possible answers as to why these suspicions and tensions have escalated since the events of September 11, 2001.

The actual plot of the novel takes place within the space of a couple of hours as the narrator Changez converses with an unnamed American in a Lahore café. As darkness falls both characters leave the café and make their way to the American’s hotel. These are the

² Mohsin Hamid, Interview by Harriett Gilbert, *BBC: World Book Club*, accessed 30 Jun 2013.
<http://podbay.fm/show/263658343/e/1370120760>. Subsequent reference in text,

main events that transpire in the here and now of the novel. The narrative however is complicated by the story that Changez relates in flashback. Changez begins by explaining to the American that by 2001 he had graduated from Princeton and began his career as a Pakistani immigrant living in New York City and working as a financial analyst. On a post graduation trip to Greece he fell in love with Erica, one of the other travellers. Later, on a business trip to Manila, Changez found himself trying to assert his American-ness but when he saw the towers fall he was confronted with the complexities of his own identity. In the aftermath of 9/11, as tensions escalate between India and Pakistan and while the United States is caught up in patriotic displays, Changez loses interest in his work, and begins sporting a beard. Eventually Changez decides to quit his job, but there is still the matter of his beloved Erica, who is friendly with Changez but mourning the death of her former boyfriend, Chris. The two become intimate but she is haunted by the memory of Chris, and after 9/11 her sadness turns pathological. She lands in an institution, and then disappears. Changez returns to Pakistan and becomes a university professor. He begins to verbalize his discontent with American policies and leads anti-American protests. The narrative structure aligns instances of tension in the flashback story with a growing suspicion between the two characters in the frame. Both the frame and the flashback coincide with the conclusion of the novel when

Hamid raises the level of suspense and insinuates possibilities that either Changez is a Muslim Fundamentalist who is collaborating to murder the American or that the American is a CIA agent sent to neutralize Changez, or both.

In terms of form the flashback is used to establish the possible context for the frame narrative, while the frame calls attention to how the story is told. Throughout the novel Hamid chooses to include Changez's voice only, as he narrates the whole novel in instances of active and narrative monologue. Elizabeth A. Howe explains that the speech of a dramatic monologue is characteristically objective, in that it is clearly heard by the audience as belonging to and characteristic of its speaker, and not the author. The novel voice is therefore personal, yet also objective in its singularity.³ For example the novel begins with the voice of Changez who initiates the conversation. He begins: "Excuse me, sir, may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America".⁴ This initiation statement displays elements of oral realism (Howe, 12). Readers *hear* the voice as belonging to Changez, a voice that is controlled,

³ Elisabeth Howe, *The Dramatic Monologue* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 3.

⁴ Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (London: Harcourt, Inc., 1997), 1. Subsequent reference in text.

polite, and audibly English. Changez also establishes initial pivots of the narrative by focusing on aspects of Islamophobia (fear of the beard) and anti-Americanism and bringing them to the foreground. Another aspect of narration concerns Changez's observation and interpretation of the gestures and reactions of the American, who does not speak throughout the novel. On the one hand this 'silence' or 'silencing of' the American according to Hamid in his interview with Gilbert invites readers to step into the novel and attempt to provide the missing half of a one sided conversation. On the other hand, the silencing of the other and single perspective approach to narrative can point to the problematic of contemporary mainstream media. In another interview with Deborah Solomon the author explains that the silencing of the American is a reversal of world affairs, and particularly a reversal of the role of American media where the only Muslims that are allowed to speak are those "speaking in grainy videos from caves".⁵ The reversal in this case offers readers an alternative perspective and points to the general subjectivity of the information that they are routinely provided with.

Hamid simultaneously invites readers to consider the reliability of the narrator. On various occasions in the novel Changez himself

⁵ Mohsin Hamid, "The Stranger", Interview with Deborah Solomon, *New York Times*, 15 Apr 2007, accessed 30, Jun 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/15/magazine/15wwlnQ4.t.html?_r=0

remarks on the possible inaccuracy of his account. For example, when critiquing the behaviour of his Princeton classmates in Greece, behaviour which Changez characterises as devoid of refinement, Changez explains: “But it may be that I am inclined to exaggerate these irritants in retrospect, knowing the course my relationship with your country would later take” (21). On another occasion, describing the new employees of Underwood Samson, Changez admits: “It struck me then—no I must be honest, it strikes me now—that shorn of hair and dressed in our battle fatigues, we would have been virtually indistinguishable” (38). Among other examples in the text these instances of undermining the reliability of the narration make Changez seem less dogmatic, and therefore encourage readers to trust him more. However, throughout the novel Changez highlights his concern with being ‘assumed’ unreliable by the American. Towards the end of the novel, when tensions between the two characters seem to peak Changez points out what he perceives as the American auditor’s convictions concerning the accuracy of his narrative by claiming: “it seems to me that you have ceased to listen to my chatter; or perhaps you are convinced that I am an inveterate liar” (183). The word ‘convinced’ here suggests that Changez is concerned that the American’s preconceptions about him detract from his reliability. According to the overt plot (two strangers meeting in a Lahore café) these preconceptions would refer to Changez’s nationality, religion,

and/or race. However the possible covert plot (premeditated assassination) adds political orientation to these concerns. In other words if the American is an agent sent to assassinate Changez then he is likely to have preconceptions or misconceptions about Changez which are unlikely to change. In all cases, the American does not voice any of these concerns and Changez could be perceiving them unreasonably. This seemingly mutual state of mistrust can be seen as a reflection of the general political climate of the novel and of the relationship between the two main characters.

In addition to the suspenseful nature of the novel and the lack of clear clues, the novel also includes an open ending. In the last few pages, as night falls over Lahore, both characters make their way back from the market to the Pearl Continental hotel. In the course of their stroll, tensions between Changez and the American apparently escalate. The American is startled by other characters walking behind them and again by the sound of a pistol shot in the distance. Changez explains that they should not expect the street to be empty of passers-by and that the sound is probably a car backfire. Changez explains to the American, and presumably to readers, that: "it seems an obvious thing to say, but you should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all undercover

assassins" (183). At the very end of the novel, two strangers who are following them startle the American. Changez explains that it is in fact their waiter who probably wants to greet them. At this point Changez notes that the American grabs for something in his pocket, a gun or possibly a mobile phone and the novel ends. In fact, while no act of violence transpires, readers may assume that this is a political thriller with a murderous end and look for clues to corroborate their theory. The novelist uses the flashback of the novel to highlight the circumstances that can lead readers to such an assumption.

By delving into the experiences of a Muslim immigrant in America before, during, and after the events of 9/11, the flashback section emphasizes personal and political conditions that are responsible for the amplification of this apparent state of mistrust between the main character, his readers, the auditor as well as segments of the societies that they both represent. These sections focus primarily on the concept of identity in an age of globalisation, antagonism to capitalist fundamentalism, American self-righteous wrath in the face of 9/11, and third-world activism or resistance to an existing imbalanced world order. Initially the flashback section explores the issue of the complex identity in the context of globalization. In the early section of his narration Changez delves into his experience as an immigrant in America before the events of 9/11.

On his post-graduation trip to Greece, Changez, commenting on the nature of the island of Rhodes, claims: "It seems to me unlike the other islands we visited. Its cities; they guarded against the Turks, much like the army and navy and air force of modern Greece, part of a wall against the East that still stands. How strange it was for me to think I grew up on the other side!" (23). This statement points to the historical and cultural distinction which divides the world into East and West. Changez finds himself a tourist in Greece, yet is confronted with evidence of the cities' historical resistance against that which is Eastern, a construct with which Changez clearly identifies. However Changez does not state that he is an Easterner, instead he comments about growing up on the *other side*. In this case, being part of the institution of Princeton and living in New York lends Changez an internationalized experience, yet the reality that he confronts in Greece, for example, has historically divided the world into that which is Eastern and that which is Western.

Another aspect of identity that is troubling for Changez involves the opposition between Underwood Samson and Pakistan. Changez maintains on his first day as an employee at the firm that, "On that day, I did not think of myself as a Pakistani, but as an Underwood Samson trainee, and my firm's impressive offices made me proud" (34). A feeling of shame and resentment foils this feeling of pride

when Changez recounts Lahore's parallel state of under-development. On the same day, Changez observes:

Their offices were perched on the forty-first and forty-second floors of a building in midtown—higher than any two structures here in Lahore would be if they were stacked one atop the other—and while I had previously flown air planes and visited the Himalayas, nothing had prepared me for the drama, the power of the view from their lobby. This, I realized, was another world from Pakistan; supporting my feet were the achievements of the most technologically advanced civilisation our species had ever known. Often during my stay in your country, such comparisons troubled me. In fact, they did more than trouble me: they made me resentful. Four thousand years ago, we, the people of the Indus River basin, had cities that were laid out on grids and boasted underground sewers, while the ancestors of those who would invade and colonize America were illiterate barbarians. Now our cities were largely unplanned, unsanitary affairs, and America had universities with individual endowments greater than our national budget for education. To be reminded of this vast disparity was, for me, to be ashamed. (33-34)

In this case, corporate/capitalist America is empowering and simultaneously shameful, because Changez associates with both worlds, yet belongs wholly to neither. The feeling of power associated with the company and the opposing feeling of shame towards the disparity between the company and Lahore presents an identity conflict. In Manila he admits to behaviour which reflects this problematic: "I did something in Manila I had never done before: I attempted to act and speak, as much as my dignity

would permit, more like an *American*" (65). Here, Changez demonstrates the need to act more *American*, because of the confidence and power that such an identity begets within a professional setting. Changez comments that "the Filipinos we worked with seemed to look up to my American colleagues, accepting them almost instinctively as members of the officer class of global business—and I wanted my share of that respect as well"(65). He begins acting more American, bossing executives his father's age, cutting in front of lines, and answering that he was a New Yorker when asked where he was from. This behaviour, while initially empowering, again raises a feeling of shame within Changez. In the frame section Changez adds, seemingly in response to the American's questioning: "Did these things trouble me, you ask? Certainly, sir; I often felt ashamed" (65). The shame arises from having to give up his Pakistani-ness to partake in his new corporate position of power as an Underwood Samson employee. In this case, being Pakistani detracts from his position of power; two facets of his identity collide, and he is forced to choose one over the other. This choice of America elicits a feeling of shame.

On another occasion on this same trip Changez is again confronted with the collision of his two identities. He recounts that as he was riding in a limousine, stuck in traffic he glanced out of the window to find a Filipino driver returning his gaze. Changez is astounded

by the intensity of the hostility in his gaze, and assumes that it's due to the driver's dislike of Americans. Then one of his colleagues asks a question, and Changez explains that, "something rather strange took place" (67):

I looked at him—at his fair hair and light eyes and, most of all, his oblivious immersion in the minutiae of our work—and thought, you are so foreign. I felt in that moment much closer to the Filipino driver than to him; I felt I was play-acting when in reality I ought to be making my way home, like the people on the street outside. (67)

At this instant, and faced with his colleague's immersion in globalized corporate affairs on one side and the Filipino driver's hostility to them on the other, Changez's orientations forcefully and unexpectedly clarify themselves. It is worth noting here that the main alienating factor between Changez and his colleague is not necessarily a racial or religious matter, but more so an economic one. He realizes that his American colleague, though a fellow employee at Underwood Samson, is foreign to him, while the Filipino driver shares a "Third World sensibility" (67). In this case, the collision of corporate America and third-world destitution clarifies itself to Changez, who realizes that his national identity is at odds with his corporate identity, and that within a globalized setting these two facets are in fact mutually exclusive.

In the novel Hamid suggests that corporate capitalism is in itself a type of fundamentalism. Most readers probably assume that the novel's title refers to Changez since, as Martin Kramer puts it: "By sheer dint of usage, Islamic fundamentalism had become *the* most cited fundamentalism of all".⁶ However, repeated references in the novel to the term *Fundamentals* actually point to capitalist culture. 'Focus on the Fundamentals' in fact is described as Underwood Samson's guiding principle: "it mandated a single-minded attention to financial detail, teasing out the true nature of those drivers that determine an asset's value" (99). Changez explains it as a systematic pragmatism, where "[he] learned to prioritize—to determine the axis on which advancement would be most beneficial—and then to apply [himself] single-mindedly to the achievement of that objective" (37). With the invasion of Afghanistan that later takes place, Changez explains that though he tried to convince himself that these events that were being played out on the world stage were not relevant to his personal life, he was no longer capable of so thorough a self-deception. He found it difficult to concentrate on the pursuit of fundamentals (100). In this case, the novel might suggest that the systematic and pragmatic approach that is propagated by global corporations to achieve maximum gain which has come to shape American culture

⁶ Martin Kramer, "Coming to Terms: Fundamentalists or Islamists?," *Middle East Quarterly*, 26 Oct 2009, accessed 30 Jun 2013, <http://www.geocities.com/martinkramerorg/Terms.htm>

and politics, is itself a kind of fundamentalism. In narrating the early sections of the novel, before the events of September 11th, the main character focuses on the conflicting facets of his self-identification. He points to his growing awareness of the historical divide between East and West and then to a more pressing awareness of the contemporary economic divide between the First World and the Third World, and finally to a fundamental pursuit of economic gain at the expense of the Third World which Changez eventually likens to a state of war.

This awareness turns into tension with Changez's reaction to the attacks on the World Trade Centre buildings. Changez maintains that in his hotel room on the last evening in Manila, he turned on the television and "stared as one—and then the other—of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Centre collapsed" (72). His reaction is surprising to him; he claims: "And then I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased" (72). Jean Baudrillard in his essay "The Spirit of Terrorism" sheds light on the psychological basis of this reaction and relates it to the nature of terrorism in the twenty-first century.⁷ Baudrillard asserts that there is a terroristic imagination that unwittingly dwells in all of us, a universal allergy to any definitive order or power (5-6). He explains that, "there is, indeed,

⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2002), 15. Subsequent reference in text.

a fundamental antagonism here, but one which points past the spectre of America... and the spectre of Islam, to *triumphant globalization battling against itself*" (11). In other words, Baudrillard explains that the existing world order, which has been established since the end of the Cold War, finds itself grappling with the antagonistic forces scattered throughout the globe. He adds that, "we have dreamt of this event... everyone without exception has dreamt it—because no one can avoid dreaming of the destruction of any power that has become hegemonic to this degree" (5). In the novel Changez explains that at "that moment, my thoughts were not with the victims of the attack... no, I was caught up in the symbolism of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees" (73). Baudrillard expounds on this reaction by explaining that,

...the role of images is highly ambiguous. For, at the same time as they exalt the event, they also take it hostage. They serve to multiply it to infinity and, at the same time they are a diversion and a neutralization... The image consumes the event, in the sense that it absorbs it and offers it for consumption. Admittedly, it gives it unprecedented impact, but impact as image-event. (27)

Changez comments on the image-event of the towers collapsing, rather than the tragedy as a real event. As an image-event, the collapse of the twin towers is highly symbolic for Changez, representing a collapse of fundamentalist corporate America or what Baudrillard explains as the suicide of globalization. Readers'

reactions to Changez's Baudrillardian position can vary from levels of agreement, understanding, or horrification depending on each reader's personal experience of the traumatic event. However what Hamid is implying here is that Changez's reactions are not necessarily evil or even stemming out of a hatred for the US. Changez clearly reacts to the symbol, and Baudrillard argues that given the hegemonic power of the US this reaction, what he calls the terroristic imagination, unwittingly dwells in all of us.

The reaction that Changez refers to— the initial smile— is specifically telling about the relationship Changez has with America. In his conversation with the American Changez maintains that these feelings are often justified in war. But Changez is not at war with America. He states: "I was not at war with America. Far from it: I was the product of an American university; I was earning a lucrative American salary; I was infatuated with an American woman. So why did part of me desire to see America harmed?" (73). An analysis of his reaction can be presented by looking at the visual symbol of the collapsing towers. In an earlier reference where Changez comments about the height of the towers of Underwood Samson offices, he clarifies that nothing in Pakistan compared. This reference suggests that Changez's satisfaction from the site of the towers collapsing, at least on a symbolic level, could be a result of the symbolic equation between Pakistan and

America. The collapse visually narrows the gap between America and Pakistan. As such, the event can be symbolically perceived as a harmonisation of his conflicting or warring identity.

In the novel the collapse of the twin towers functions as a catalyst for Changez's changing sentiments and perspectives. In fact, he begins by describing how America's reactions to this event cement already growing suspicions that he is at war with the global super power. Changez describes America's response to crisis as a state of self-righteous wrath that plays out on personal, cultural, and political levels. For example on the flight back to New York from the Philippines Changez is escorted by armed guards into a room and made to strip down to his boxer shorts. His late entrance onto the plane elicits looks of concern from his fellow passengers. He explains: "I flew to New York uncomfortable in my own face: I was aware of being under suspicion; I felt guilty" (74). He feels guilty because he is aware of his initial reaction, and America seems to assume this reaction and instantly becomes suspicious of him. When he arrives at the airport in New York City, the city on an institutional level mirrors that mistrust. Changez explains that on arrival he is separated from his team at immigration. He is dispatched for a secondary inspection in a room where he sits on a metal bench next to a tattooed man in handcuffs (75). The significant detail here is that Changez's belonging to the Muslim

faith and his Middle Eastern appearance necessarily separates him from his colleagues and relegates him to the category of possible felon or criminal. The officer who interrogated him asks “what is the purpose of your trip to the United States?” and Changez replies, “I live here”, to which she claims “That is not what I asked you... what is the *purpose* of your trip in the United States?” (75). The use of the word ‘trip’ in itself suggests that America has closed its doors or lowered its gates against Muslim immigrants. On his return Changez explains that rumours among Pakistani immigrants were circulating, claiming that “Pakistani cabdrivers were being beaten within an inch of their lives; the FBI was raiding mosques, shops, and even people’s houses; Muslim men were disappearing, perhaps into shadowy detention centres for questioning or worse” (94). Visually the narrator points to the proliferation of US flags which seemed to proclaim: “*We are America... the mightiest civilization the world has ever known; you have slighted us; beware our wrath*” (79). These sections of the novel suggest that though Changez’s loyalties as an immigrant to America are questionable on an instinctual level, the country’s reaction to its Muslim immigrant community as a whole reflects and materializes these instincts. Readers of the novel are meant to evaluate the repercussions of Changez’s fleeting feeling of satisfaction at the site of the towers collapsing, and to consider the extent that these feelings actually criminalize him.

The novel then considers some of the implications of America's retributory 'War on Terror' on the main character, including the invasion of Afghanistan and then later Iraq. Changez explains that he "had been avoiding the evening news, preferring not to watch the partisan and sports-event-like coverage given to the mismatch between the American bombers with their twenty-first-century weaponry and the ill-equipped and ill-fed Afghan tribesmen below" (99). This invasion refers to the unfolding events in October 2001, only one month after 9/11, when NATO and the allied forces launched operation Enduring Freedom with the purpose of invading Afghanistan and toppling the Taliban regime, which hosted al-Qaeda leadership. Changez critically points to a specific casting of these events. In the novel Changez explains that as he is flipping through the channels in his Manhattan apartment attempting to watch a soothing sitcom "[he] chanced upon a newscast with ghostly night-vision images of American troops dropping into Afghanistan for what was described as a daring raid on a Taliban command post" (99). He explains: "I was reminded of the film *Terminator*, but with the roles reversed so that the machines were cast as heroes" (99). In the *Terminator* directed by James Cameron in 1984 a robotic assassin from a post-apocalyptic future travels back in time to kill a waitress, whose son will eventually grow up and lead humanity in a war against the

machines. This reference comments on Changez's perception of a grotesque disparity in the balance of power between the US and the Taliban, and also on the idea of the US media 'casting' of villains and heroes in real life. Changez also seems to be commenting on his perception of a bizarre reversal of the usual construct in which good overcomes a formidable evil that characterizes most heroic stories of triumph. Another reference to the collision of reality and Hollywood in the casting of the events can be deduced from what Changez describes as America's state of nostalgia. He clarifies that there was:

...something undeniably retro about the flags and uniforms, about the generals addressing cameras in war rooms and newspaper headlines featuring such words as *duty* and *honour*... Living in New York was suddenly like living in a film about the Second World War; I, a foreigner, found myself staring out at a set that ought to be viewed not in Technicolor but in grainy black and white. (114-115)

The Hollywood-ization of 9/11 and the War on Terror according to Changez is retro in the sense that clear-cut lines between heroes and villains are drawn, nationalistic fervour overcomes considerations of human rights, and the complexity of the age of globalization and its 'international' citizens are cast aside. In this charged scenario of clear dualities, Changez's complex identity has no more room to operate or survive.

In the novel this US reaction to trauma highlights a clash between the concept of globalization and the realities of economic and

military superpowers at odds with a disenfranchised third-world community. In the wake of the events of 9/11, and after armed men had assaulted the Indian Parliament, and Pakistan was confronting the possibility of war Changez decides to return to Pakistan for a visit (121). On his return flight to America, and given the looming prospects of war between India and Pakistan, he notices that many of his fellow passengers are similar to him in age, college students and young professionals. He notes the irony in his situation where “children and the elderly were meant to be sent away from impending battles, but in [their] case it was the fittest and brightest who were leaving, those who in the past would have been most expected to remain” (129). He explains that this realisation filled him with a sense of contempt. The realization that Changez mentions here concerns another curious reversal of world affairs in which young, healthy men are systematically sent away from their countries of origin to seek opportunities for education and employment in the developed world and particularly in the world superpower. When that very same superpower engages in a war scenario against the indigenous state, the position of these young men becomes highly precarious. The character Juan Bautista, chief of the publishing company that the firm evaluated in Chile, further delineates this position. Juan Bautista explains to Changez the concept of Janissaries, or Christian boys captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in a Muslim army. They

fought to erase their own civilization (151). Hamid's introduction of the concept of Janissaries actually serves to historicise the phenomenon of immigration and brain drain. In fact readers digging further into the concept would find eerie similarities between the cases of contemporary immigrants and janissaries, with a few reservations. According Sylvia Ducharme:

[the Ottomans] instituted a system of conscripting Christian adolescent boys, chiefly in the Balkans, and then created a Palace school system of educating and training the boys, war prisoners and the slaves for service in the Sultan's Palace, army, and branches of government. All this was called the Ottoman *kul*-slave- system. These people were the *Kapukulu* 'slaves of the sultan' and they formed the Janissary Corps... the intelligent, strong, and handsome adolescents, in addition to those from prominent families were chosen.⁸

Ducharme adds that, "a number of families, especially in poor, mountain districts, gave their sons of their own accord. More worldly families were delighted to see their children secure a footing on the Ottoman career ladder. As the education and training opportunities of being a Janissary became well-known, Christian and Muslim families volunteered their sons and sometimes used bribes to have them selected" (2-3). This concept, especially in the case of willing families who would send their children of their own accord for a chance of a better future, could be compared to modern day skilled worker immigration to the

⁸ Sylvia Ducharme, "Slaves of the Sultan: the Janissaries," *Centre for Middle East Studies*, (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2001), 1-2. Subsequent reference in text.

developing world and the concept of brain drain. Indeed in the novel Changez begins to perceive himself as a modern day Janissary, “a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to [his] and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that [his] own country faced a threat of war” (152). In this case, Changez’s earlier perspective of globalization which initially brings him shame turns into an awareness that this globalization camouflages a state of war between the world’s superpower and states like his own, and this realization turns Changez’s shame into contempt. Changez explains that he had always resented the manner in which America conducted itself in the world, “[the] country’s constant interference in the affairs of others was insufferable. Vietnam, Korea, the straits of Taiwan, the Middle East, and now Afghanistan: in each of the major conflicts and standoffs that ringed [his] mother continent of Asia, America played a central role” (156). He also notes that finance (aid and sanctions) was the means by which the American empire exercised its power and that it was right for him, as a financial analyst, to refuse to participate any longer in facilitating this project of domination. He is only surprised that it had taken him this long to come to such a conclusion. In this case Changez slowly begins to realize that the concept of globalization is merely a positive spin on the reality of imperialism, in which he had been taking an active role serving the empire. Changez’s reading of contemporary world

affairs in a historical context is offered in the novel by Hamid as a possible way of looking at contemporary world politics. In fact, readers here are meant to consider whether this view that Changez recounts is a fundamentalist view or whether it is a viable reading of the present.

From this perspective Changez begins to perceive the excesses of the American empire. He explains that the US response to the violence of 9/11 seemed to him then, and continues to seem, like posturing. He explains:

As a society, you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those that attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your superiority. And you acted out these beliefs on the stage of the world, so that the entire planet was rocked by the repercussions of your tantrums. (168)

Reflecting on the effects of these tantrums, in terms of the War on Terror, Changez clarifies that:

A common strand appeared to unite these conflicts, and that was the advancement of a small coterie's concept of American interest in the guise of the fight against terrorism, which was defined to refer only to organized and politically motivated killing of civilians by killers *not* wearing the uniforms of soldiers. I recognized that if this was to be the single most important priority of our species, then the lives of those of us who lived in the lands in which such killers also lived had no meaning except as collateral damage. This, I reasoned, was why America felt justified in bringing so many deaths to Afghanistan and Iraq. (178)

Changez presents his interpretation of the rhetoric of the war on terrorism by highlighting the selectivity involved in the labelling of violence as terroristic only if the violence is not condoned by states. He also clarifies that the War on Terror is a façade meant to justify the pursuit of American interests, and that as such his life as a Pakistani can be forfeited as collateral damage. In this case Changez perceives himself in a state of war with the US, a war of survival. He adds to the American that, “such an America had to be stopped in the interests not only of the rest of humanity, but also in your own... I resolve to do so, as best I could” (168). Here Changez demonstrates his personal need to fight American foreign policy as not stemming necessarily out of hatred to America, but out of a personal need for self-preservation as well as a feeling of collective responsibility.

The first step that he embarks on is returning to his native Pakistan and taking on a position as a university lecturer. In the university Changez begins to advocate US disengagement from Pakistan through peaceful demonstrations. When a student of his is accused of attempting to assassinate a US coordinator and whisked away to a secret detention, Changez is enraged by the student’s treatment. He states forcefully to an international television news that, “no country inflicts death so readily upon the inhabitants of other countries, frightens so many people so far away, as America” (182).

This statement suggests that Changez accuses the US of terrorizing the citizens of the world. He explains to the American that his interview appeared to resonate to the extent that he was warned by his comrades that America might react by sending an emissary to intimidate him or worse (183). He mentions that, “since then, I have felt like Kurtz waiting for his Marlow” (183). The reference to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902) here draws parallels between American imperialism and European colonialism and sheds light on a contemporary deviation in which Changez perceives himself as Kurtz rather than say, Marlow or one of the Cannibals. This reference can be read on a variety of levels. On the one hand, in the *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow meets Kurtz on his deathbed. In fact, Kurtz is allowed to speak his last words to Marlow and have them be heard by an emissary of the empire much like the American auditor of Changez’s story. This inter-textual reference can be another plot teaser suggesting that Changez, like Kurtz, is about to be killed either by the American assassin or possibly in a suicide mission in which he takes the American out. Thematically, the link can suggest that Changez like Kurtz undergoes a journey into a new environment seeking wealth and power (the US or Africa). This journey ends up revealing certain truths about that environment that are often concealed by popular media. The horror of the European colonial enterprise in Africa can then be compared to the horror of American

Imperialism that readily inflicts deaths and terrorizes the inhabitants of other countries under the guise of fighting terrorism. Another interesting feature of this reference is that Changez perceives himself as Kurtz waiting for his Marlow. In other words he does not perceive himself as a native but as a member of this empire who has 'gone native'. This perception complicates Changez's self-identification and blurs the lines between self and other, which are more clearly racial in the colonial sense. Changez actually explains that, "we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous being we previously imagined ourselves to be. Something of us is now outside, and something outside is now within us" (174).

The question that readers could be asking themselves at the end of the novel is certainly who the 'Reluctant Fundamentalist' is, and what reluctance or fundamentalism is Hamid actually pointing to? Reluctance, which literally means an unwillingness to do something, can point to both characters that wait for the entirety of their conversation to take any specific action. The term fundamentalist on the other hand refers to one who returns to core or basic principles, rigidly adheres to them, and is usually intolerant to opposition. This term can point to Changez's changed worldview and can also point to American economic and nationalistic fundamentalism that becomes more apparent to

Changez in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. In fact, the title is so elusive and all-encompassing that it signifies both characters and neither of them at the same time. The title seems to also point to any reader who clearly attaches the title to any of the main characters. Changez in this political novel goes further than telling us a story from a new perspective, he actually involves us as the third main character, and we are meant to question our own fundamentals, our own core beliefs and values and consider how they shape our perception of the world around us and the individuals that we encounter.

Conclusion

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* the major term used is the 'fundamentalist' in the title. The initial reference seems to point to the character of Changez as a Muslim fundamentalist, who possibly returns to strict adherence to his faith after the events of 9/11. This implication is cemented in relation to Changez's initial smile in reaction to the sight of the towers collapsing as well as his subsequent travels back to Pakistan, growing a beard, and his political rhetoric against the US. However, the novel slowly undermines this implication as Changez begins to perceive himself as a Janissary serving an empire that is exploitative and ultimately destructive, yet one that he still appreciates and loves. In fact the

repeated reference to corporate 'fundamentals' throughout the novel complicates this term and suggests that it more aptly refers to systematic and pragmatic US capitalism as in itself fundamentalist. Academic and writer Malise Ruthven explains that:

Fundamentalism, according to its critics, is just a dirty 14-letter word. It is a term of abuse leveled by liberals and Enlightenment rationalists against any group, religious or otherwise, that dares to challenge the absolutism of the post-Enlightenment outlook. Other scholars argue that fundamentalism is a caricature or mirror-image of the same post-Enlightenment outlook it professes to oppose: by adopting the same rational style of argument used by the secular enemy, fundamentalists repress or bleach out the multifaceted, polysemic ways in which myth and religions appeal to all aspects of the human psyche, not just to the rational mind, with fundamentalists exposing what one anthropologist calls 'the hubris of reason's pretense in trying to take over religion's role'.⁹

Ruthven's presentation of the term clarifies the shiftiness of a word that refers to both those that use it as a label and those that are labeled by it. The novel clearly alludes to this duality in our understanding of fundamentalism. Fundamentalism emerges in Hamid's novel to refer to any movement that is absolutist in nature and promoting its rhetoric at the expense of others. This overarching term is the least politicized and perhaps the most descriptive of the existing rhetoric concerning the Middle Eastern political context. The fundamentalism of Zionism, nationalism,

⁹ Malise Ruthven, *Fundamentalism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 5.

Islamism, capitalism, secularism, totalitarianism or globalism, in fact any absolutism which is enforced at the expense of others, is the breeding ground for violence.

The novel refers to the term terrorist or terrorism on two occasions. The first is a sarcastic reference when Changez mentions to the American auditor that, even though it is quite obvious, he should not imagine that all Pakistanis are 'terrorists'. A second and more serious reference is when Changez refers to America's 'war on terrorism'. The narrator describes this as a fight only against organized and politically motivated killing of civilians by killers not wearing the uniforms of soldiers. Changez describes these wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as meant primarily to advance American interests and where the deaths of civilians that happen to live there are largely considered as collateral damage. The utilization of the term in these two cases is critical of the US. In the first, Changez highlights sarcastically the obvious generalization that the term implies especially when it is used to describe an entire country, religion, or culture. The criticism here is of American media, academia and political rhetoric that have exhausted the ambiguous term. The other reference to the war on terrorism highlights the selectivity involved in the labeling of an act of murder as terrorist or as war depending on the identity of those committing the act. The narrator in this case is referring to

the killings of civilians by American troops in Iraq or Afghanistan, or the killings of civilians in other US sponsored wars or conflicts that are meant to advance US economic and political power.

This novel deals primarily with issues of identity and particularly with the complex identity that is torn between East and West in a highly globalized and simultaneously polarized setting. Feelings of shame and pride arise from the main characters' association with one side over the other. Corporate America is associated with Pride and Third-World Pakistan is associated with feelings of shame. Changez finds himself caught between two worlds that are often pitted against each other violently.

Conclusion

The five Middle Eastern political novels dealt with in this thesis respond to a seemingly shared historical experience. The region is unified in its Islamic Ottoman and Mughal tradition, its experience of post-colonial ills particularly concerning imposed borders set at the end of World War I, the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 in its geographical center, Palestine, and the impact of continued Western interests in the region since the discovery of oil in the 1920s and its commercialization in the 1950s. Today these Western interests are epitomized in interventionist strategies in the form of influence over internal policy either through aid or embargos, or direct intervention in the form of actual invasion of Middle Eastern territories after September 11, 2001. The failure of Middle Eastern states to protect their citizens and their direct implication in acts of political violence against their populations for the purpose of state building or maintaining the status quo is another major aspect of this experience. Variations of nationalist and political Islamist ideologies have emerged in the region with the aim of defying these types of interventions. These ideologies, which often utilize violence, have been systematically demonized by the West and have also been treated with suspicion from within Middle Eastern states.

Even though this historical experience seems shared, the contemporary effect that it had on each particular context is clearly different. The five novels dealt with in this thesis demonstrate that each case of political strife is based on specific facets of this experience. In the case of *The Yacoubian Building* and *Snow*, the authors focus on the idea of the modernizing state/republic and on the impediments faced by Egyptians and Turks within their individual state-building projects. In the Egyptian case, the end of the monarchy and colonial rule through coup d'état in 1952 resulted in the creation of a military state, whose leaders ceded power one to the other. This undemocratic militarization of the state led to the breakdown in opposition parties on the one hand and on the other, a complete lack of social and economic vision. Opposition emerged in the form of Political Islam and was the only tolerated form—within limitations— utilized to function as a scarecrow and justify security measures that ultimately secured the position of the state. In Turkey, the modernization project, which began in 1923, endeavored to follow a strictly Western model. In doing so, Turkish republicans banned and controlled all forms of popular religious expression while attempting to maintain a democratic political system. This situation backfired on two levels, first, the military had to intervene in political life on various occasions through coup d'états to ensure the continuation of their project, and secondly the religious vacuum created was filled by more literal and fundamentalist interpretations of Islam.

Almost Dead and *The Sirens of Baghdad* on the other hand both deal with a presumed occupying force, a Western enemy, and can even be described as novels of war. The struggles of the characters in these novels concern existence within a war scenario and also their chosen methods of resistance. Both novels portray two opposing routes. In the Israeli/Palestinian novel the options for the Israeli characters are staying in Israel or leaving and abandoning the Zionist dream. For the Palestinians, there is no option of leaving, only “attempting to live a normal life” within the limitations of occupation or violently resisting it. In the Iraqi context, the options are even bleaker. Characters cannot escape the reality of war and their conundrum concerns their methods of resistance: the options are more violence or a much sought after intellectual revival. In the case of these two novels specific historical Western interventions such as the creation of the state of Israel within the heart of the Middle East in 1948 as well as the US aggression against Iraq, which began in 1991, are the contexts for political violence. The last novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* deals with broader aspects of contemporary politics: immigration and globalization in a post 9/11 climate. The main character in Hamid’s novel likens globalization to colonization and imperialism and as such suggests that modern immigrants working within the capitalist structures function as Janissaries fighting against their own nations. The novel is concerned with contemporary fundamentalism in its many guises whether through capitalism, nationalism, or Islamism. The

character of Changez embodies the global citizen whose multifaceted experience is at odds with the fundamentalisms of contemporary politics.

Though the novels deal with different aspects of contemporary Middle Eastern politics they actually present similar motivations for violence and these motivations are predominantly emotional. In fact all the novelists present the character of the protagonists who commit or consider committing acts of violence, such as Fahmi, Taha, and the unnamed narrator in *The Sirens*, as initially non-violent. Violence in these texts is the climax of the plot. For example, in *Almost Dead* the character of Fahmi initially lives in the village of Murair with his parents and plans to enroll in Bir Zeit University. The village and the university are both presented as the choice of a normal life as opposed to moving to the refugee camps and joining the resistance. In the novel the historical and continuing context of occupation surrounds Fahmi and drives him both physically and psychologically towards the camps and towards the path of violent resistance. In *The Yacoubian Building* Taha is described initially as hard-working, ambitious, pious and committed to joining the Police Academy. However, the interaction of the character with the mechanisms of state corruption, particularly through his experience of torture in prison, drives him to seek violent revenge against the state. Another clear example of this feature is the character of the unnamed narrator in *The Sirens*

of Baghdad. In this novel the character describes himself as hating violence and devastated by other people's sorrows. Through the development of plot in a war scenario, the character finds himself in Baghdad and compelled to seek revenge against the occupying force. In fact the characters in these three novels are not only driven to violence, they are compelled to seek violent revenge based on custom and cultural regulations which position revenge as the necessary response to shame. Author Roland Muller explains the phenomenon of shame as a predominant value in most Middle Eastern settings. He explains that, "Shameful deeds are covered up. If they can't be covered up, they are revenged".¹ The author clarifies that "The whole concept of shameful deeds can be traced back to the early Bedouin code of practice, which existed even before Islam arrived. This code, still much in existence today, affects not only the way individuals act, but also the actions of entire nations".

In all three cases the characters utilize violence particularly to satisfy their need to avenge their honor or to avenge the death of a loved one. Fahmi is driven to the resistance movement to avenge the death of his mother, Taha is driven to the Gamaa Islamiyaa to avenge his lost honor in rape, and the unnamed narrator in *The*

¹ Roland Muller, "Honor and Shame in a Middle Eastern Setting", *Nabataean Culture and Religion* (2000), accessed 30 Mar 2014, <http://nabataea.net/h%26s.html>. Subsequent reference in text.

Sirens of Baghdad avenges his father's honor from being manhandled and physically exposed by American GIs. This concept of vengeance is not particular to Middle Eastern or Muslim communities; in fact it is a universal response to injustice. Psychiatrist Sandy Bloom asserts that vengeance is a typical response to breaking the rules of justice and takes over when institutions of law fail to restore this sense of justice. She explains that "The abuse of power on the part of the perpetrator and the helplessness experienced by the victim are hallmark characteristics of interpersonal violence and, therefore, we can expect that a victim will be highly motivated to seek revenge".² She adds that "acts of revenge can be viewed as much a failure of the social group as a failure of the individual... Revenge takes over when laws – and the institutions that support those laws - fail". In the cases of these three Middle Eastern novels state torture and war crimes are perpetrated by authority figures themselves such as the IDF, Egyptian security forces, and American GIs in Iraq.

Even though the novelists seem to make a case that in the absence of state justice or law capable of deterring or punishing such crimes, interpersonal violence and the will for violent retaliation are natural human reactions, the novelists themselves do not seem

² Sandy L. Bloom, "Commentary: Reflections on the Desire for Revenge," *Journal of Emotional Abuse* (2001): 61-94, accessed 28 Mar 2014. <http://www.nonviolenceandsocialjustice.org/SiteData/docs/Revenge%20commentary/4cb5e234dbf2b40a8a77a39605b88a6b/Revenge%20commentary.pdf>

to champion or justify such reactions. In both *Almost Dead* and *The Sirens of Baghdad* for example the characters choose to abort their missions at the last second. In depicting the Palestinian and Iraqi national struggles, the authors moralize their protagonists and their causes by suggesting that at the end and despite grave injustice these characters still abandon violence. In both these cases, the characters come to a realization that their grievances are personal rather than political. They both resist the propaganda of resistance movements who attempt to color their personal tragedies as public and religious. In these two cases where the context is one of a foreign occupation, the protagonists at the end cannot help but humanize their perceived enemy whether it is Croc or the Western travellers in Beirut airport. The protagonists resist violence and end up doing violence only to themselves. In *The Yacoubian Building* on the other hand, Taha carries on his mission. Al-Aswany's choice can point to Taha's questionable moral character which has been distorted by politico-religious rhetoric. In the novel Taha perceives his personal desire for revenge as part of a Jihad against the state. The character cannot dissociate between these two causes, and this perhaps represents the incentive for him to commit the act of political assassination. As opposed to the two earlier novels dealing with an outside force, the US army and the IDF, the Egyptian context is more complex since it is the Egyptian state which tortures and humiliates its citizens.

This situation makes the violence in the Egyptian context not only seem unjust but also a betrayal.

Each of these three contexts relates interpersonal violence to state violence in the form of military or police excesses. In fact, in all these novels there is an interesting discussion of the role of the military and police violence in state building or in maintaining the status quo. In the Palestinian/Israeli context, for example, individuals wishing to acquire citizenship or a state of their own use violence to make their voices heard. This is both in retaliation to violent state laws that lead directly to a loss of life (building of ramps or checkpoints) or the violent acquisition of lands supported by the military muscle of the occupying state. Issaf Gavron actually demonstrates the recurrent strategy of violence as a feature of state building by referencing the violence involved in the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and creating parallels between that and the current violence perpetrated by the Palestinians for a seemingly similar cause. In *The Yacoubian Building* the issue does not concern citizenship but rather citizens' collision with the corrupt and violent police state mechanisms meant to maintain the status quo. In the novel, it is the actual government, which is meant to ensure education, healthcare, and chances of economic development that violently suppresses citizens in an effort to maintain its political hold over the state and suppress opposition. And finally in the Iraqi context, individuals

are dealing with a foreign army sent presumably to provide Iraqi freedom and democracy and get rid of a despotic ruler. This invading force is armed with a lack of cultural understanding as well as advanced weapons, and economic ambitions. *The Sirens of Baghdad* demonstrates the devastating and violent encounter of the Iraqi people with such a force.

In *Snow* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* dealing with violence is more complicated since these novels do not follow the typical format of the main character who is driven to violence in response to context. In *Snow* for example the main characters do not commit any violence. They are all victims of violence committed unto them either by the state (the death of Blue) or in retaliation (the death of Ka). In both cases, the main characters gravitate towards politics in their search for meaning and fulfillment but cannot avoid the tragic courses that their lives take. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* the main characters also do not commit any acts of violence. The novel raises a philosophical debate about twenty-first century economic practices as themselves fundamentalist and leading to third-world destitution that could be compared to earlier forms of imperialism. As such the novel deals with issues of paranoia and mistrust that color contemporary international relations and which can lead to policies of state-terrorism. As mentioned earlier, none of the novels present violence as a characteristic of the main characters. In the novels violence is a consequence of humiliation or betrayal

when it does occur, and a moral choice that is often forfeited even when it seems justified.

Another interesting commonality between the five novels involves the referencing of American interventionist policies as a clear catalyst for Middle Eastern political struggles. In the Egyptian, Iraqi, Turkish, and Pakistani novels the characters mention US intervention in the region, particularly citing the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq and continued support of the state of Israel as US aggression against the peoples of the region. Political Islamists in the novels typically paint this aggression as directed against “our Muslim brothers and sisters” perpetrated for the purposes of economic exploitation. Mohsin Hamid’s treatment of the US is the most complex and ambiguous because in his novel America is not viewed as an outside force, but rather through the experience of an immigrant who views himself as partly American. Changez’s perception of America is intimate, and colored by a host of mixed feelings. The initial point of tension with America concerns his reaction to the events of 9/11; the site of the towers collapsing pleases him. Changez is confused by his reaction, which is antagonistic and only justifiable in a state of war. America’s response to 9/11 in the form of racial profiling, hyper-nationalism, and the two wars on Afghanistan and Iraq reinforces his new perception of the relationship. He explains that a destructive post 9/11 America, which favors its interest above all else, should be

stopped for the interest of those whose lives would be lost as collateral damage and for its own sake. Changez describes counter-terrorism strategies as furthering the opposition's antagonism, and he also points to the conspicuous position and responsibility of the US as the major world power. In *Almost Dead* the US is not directly cited in the same way, but the character Croc mentions that his parents are Zionists who immigrated to Israel from Maryland, and that his siblings have migrated back. Croc routinely considers the choice of going back to America since he and his entire family have American passports. In this case, the novel alludes to American intervention in the region in the form of American Zionists who call for and facilitate the physical appropriation of Palestinian land by Jewish citizens of the world, but denies these same rights to Palestinians who geographically exist on that land. In fact the US and Israel's political relationship is undeniable, and emerges as a major point of contention in all the novels. This unique relationship is ingrained in the Middle Eastern imagination to such an extent that both entities are often considered as one and the same. Palestinian characters in *Almost Dead* instinctively associate Israel with the US and recognize that the world superpower's backing of Israel is the only reason why inhumane Israeli policies against them persist. In fact in all the novels, the US emerges as a powerful adversary meddling in the region and is perceived by many of the main and secondary characters as a direct foe.

Two authors however suggest that holding the US accountable for the turmoil of the region is scapegoating. In *The Yacoubian Building* the Gamaa Islamiya, represented through the character of Sheik Shakir, focus their oppositional rhetoric on citations of the US war on Iraq. This war is utilized by the Gamaa to draw Taha into the sphere of oppositional political Islam. However, Al-Aswany suggests that the main contributing factor for the recruitment of Taha is not a political grievance against the US but a personal grievance against the Egyptian government. Initially Taha is alienated by the state and society's rejection of him, and then he is radicalized as a consequence of the violence committed against him in prison. Al-Aswany proposes that US violence in the region is often cited and manipulated by militant recruiters who aim to turn personal grievances into political ones. Yet the novel demonstrates areas of deficiency in Egyptian internal political and social policies, which are the main reasons for the radicalization of disenfranchised youth. Even in *The Sirens of Bagdad*, which deals directly with a US invasion, Khadra uses the authorial voice of the novelist Dr. Seen and a village elder to highlight the accountability of Iraqis themselves. Dr. Seen claims to Dr. Jalal that, "the battle, the real battle, is taking place among the Muslim elite, that is, between us and the radical clerics... the struggle is internal" (274). In this case, Seen proposes the responsibility of Iraqi intellectuals in the struggle against the US invasion by focusing on the means of resistance that Iraqis are using, which ultimately furthers their

plights. A village elder in Kafr Karam, representing the voice of wisdom in Bedouin culture, claims that the US was only able to invade Iraq due to Arab weakness and loss of faith. And finally in Baghdad the unnamed narrator encounters his cousin Omar the corporal, who is a disillusioned member of the resistance. Omar claims:

If you insist on fighting... Fight for your country not against the world... Don't kill just for killing's sake. Don't fire blindly... if you want to avenge an offense, don't commit one. If you think your honor must be saved, don't dishonor your people. Don't give way to madness. (182-183)

In this case, Khadra does not undermine the necessity of resisting the US but he clearly demonstrates the folly and madness of resorting to civil war to combat a foreign invasion.

Concerning the portrayal of internal violence, each of the novels uses a specific set of terms to describe the ideological backgrounds of their characters. These terms are used by the characters themselves, by the media, or by opponents and clarify more complicated ideological and political realities of the context. The terms that are used by the authors to denote violence in their respective contexts suggest a pattern. From the perspective of those committing or considering committing violent acts, in both the Palestinian and Iraqi cases, the other is considered as an outside occupying or invading force and the violence committed by the self is labeled as resistance. Muslim terminology colors the

depiction of resistance fighters in broader cultural terms rather than strictly religious ones. That outside force often labels this type of violence as terrorism while the resistance fighter perceives himself as fighting state-sponsored terrorism. The term is always utilized to depict the actions of the other. In the novels dealing with internal conflict in the form of opposition to state policies, the terms that are utilized refer to Islamism and jihadists or a more general debate about political Islam, even though this term is never used. The idea that the Egyptian and Turkish novels presents is of political Islam as a viable governing strategy which posits itself against secular nationalist strategies adopted by both Gamal Abdel Nasser and Kemal Atatürk, the founding ideologues of these modern states. Religious terminology in these cases is highly politicized and often does not reflect purely religious ideology. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, on the other hand, does not deal with internal power struggles or direct confrontations with an occupying force. The novel deals with the philosophical confrontation of the US as a world power and its interactions with third-world nationalists. The novel does not utilize any of the terminology mentioned above, and does not present a religious or particularly political conflict but rather focuses on the economic and cultural relations between an immigrant, the empire, and his home. As such, the novel highlights the term 'fundamentalist' to denote the problematic of any ideology that represses the

multifaceted and the polysemic realities of twenty-first century globalization.

Finally, yet another major commonality between the five Middle Eastern novels is that in each the novelist grounds the political violence of the present within a clear historical context. The choice of historical pivot that the novelists return to is demonstrative of each novelist's political orientation and position. Gavron suggests that the Palestinian resistance to the state of Israel is a continuation of the Palestinian struggle that began in the mid twentieth century, and which coincides with the creation of the state of Israel. The author goes even further to compare the violence of Palestinian resistance with Zionist violence that was responsible for the creation of the state of Israel. Gavron grounds the Middle East conflict in a historical context that begins with the end of the British mandate over Palestine and the creation of the state of Israel rather than either fourth-century manuscripts about the story of David and Goliath or a strictly contemporary reading of the conflict. In the same sense, Alaa Al-Awany's presents Egyptian political violence and state corruption as a consequence of state policies that began with Gamal Abdel Nasser and the 1952 revolution. Al-Aswany in fact suggests that violence in the Egyptian context is an economic and social disease rather than a political or religious one. In the earlier part of the novel he offers a historical reading of the Egyptian political context that links the economic

and social policies of Abdel Nasser, to those of Sadat, and then later Mubarak. This linking demonstrates a buildup, with minor alterations, of state policy in Egypt concerning the military seizure of power and its ensuing political and economic devastating effects. Al-Aswany's novel suggests that Egypt's gradual economic, social, and political decline is a result of the mixture of those three autocratic rulers who ceded power to each other seemingly at the expense of the Egyptian people. In the Turkish, Iraqi, and Pakistani cases the authors also contextualize violence within a broader historical basis. Pamuk places the conflict between faith and the state as well as between Turkey and Europe within the context of early Turkish republicanism dating as far back as the birth of the Turkish republic in 1923 under the tutelage of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The novel suggests that Turkish republicanism has still not reconciled with Turkish Islam, and that Turks have still not reconciled their identity in relation to the West. Yasmina Khadra also places Iraqi discontent and the complete disintegration of Iraqi culture and society within a broader context of US mediation and meddling in the country dating as far back as the Iraq-Kuwait war in 1991 and focusing on the embargo and oil-for-food program which eventually escalated to a full fledged attack on the devastated country and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003. And finally, Mohsin Hamid proposes the view that contemporary globalization could be viewed as a continuation of earlier forms of imperialism and exploitation dating as far back as the earliest

interactions between any world power and the rest of the globe. Though the novel specifies American hegemonic power over the world, the character of Changez highlights the problematic of any hegemonic power that has in the past or that continues to dominate and abuse other less fortunate peoples. As such, all the novelists in their own capacity, clarify that the violence we see in the Middle East today is the effect of human interactions whether in capacities of state building or exploitation which have been generated and which have matured into violent struggles over time.

Collectively the novels emphasize that violence is a consequence of emotions, economics, or socio-political circumstance and not necessarily a characteristic of the region, its religion, or its people. Comparatively the novels clarify a distinction between Middle Eastern nations that are still resisting external forces of occupation and those recent republics that are struggling internally to find their own representative political system. Within these two contexts, political factions, whether governments or opposition, are generally presented, as utilizing violence systematically to serve their own interests. Individual and personal struggles of the characters within these contexts are often manipulated by either of these two camps and incorporated into the larger political struggle. In all these cases, religious and cultural values of Islam, Arabism, and the Bedouin lifestyle are infused within and complicate the

political climates in which they operate. More importantly, these novels offer insight into each distinctive case of political violence using specific terminology and contextualization that can dispel media and academia's often distorted and simplistic perception of the region and its troubles. The novels also function as foils to Western literature about political violence in the region. The space of convergence as well as the space of discrepancy between these novels and those emerging out of the West can shed light on areas of cultural understanding and areas of cultural disconnect. Edward Said's discussion of post-colonial writing in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) can actually describe the inherent value of these novels; he explains that:

Only recently have Westerners become aware that what they have to say about the history and cultures of 'subordinate' people is challengeable by the people themselves, people who a few years back were simply incorporated, culture, land, history, and all, into the great Western empires, and their disciplinary discourses.³

In other words, while relations between the nations of the world seem to remain the same, the nature of the exchange has changed. There is now a conversation.

³ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 195.

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